



## Heritage for Action / 2

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# Cultural resilience during the Corona pandemic

Italy and beyond

Edited by Rosa Tamborrino



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# Introduction

Rosa Tamborrino

This volume aims to highlight resilience of culture and heritage world during as an unexpected as cross-countries shared emergency such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The emergency covered a different period in various countries; however, it started in Italy. Response was also diverse in ways to react, reflect, present new developments coming from the experience. This volume collects some experiences in Italy and beyond. For the Italian framework it focuses on the results of a devoted research experience (MNEMONIC) with its articulations. Beyond this framework, it also includes other kind of experiences developed in other countries, namely in Portugal, in Finland, and in Iran. Taken together, they provide a colorful picture of the situation, of the perceptions of difficulties, but also of the ability to seize opportunities. Through its various contributions, the volume aims to present, above all, how culture and heritage were considered and have been essential *drivers of societal resilience* during the disaster. Furthermore, it offers elements to consider the resilience of related sectors, with a focus highlighting the new kind of – digital but not only – cultural and heritage formats created because of the specific crisis condition.

The MNEMONIC project, the results of which are presented in this volume, was born, in June 2020, shortly after the end of the first lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic when, we thought we had emerged from the emergency phase. The initial observations and reflections had led to a research project that set out to further investigate the cultural phenomenon that had unfolded. The evidence of the quality of the response to the emergency by the world of culture and heritage in Italy created the conditions for the project and later prompted us to report its outcomes in this volume.

During the months before, when people had been forced to stay indoors, a wide variety of initiatives had emerged, offering new, or at least unusual, cultural formats. These forms of entertainment and “comfort” had set themselves the task of filling the void created by isolation.

Right from the preliminary stages, the interest in mapping these initiatives had seemed significant due to their overall meaningfulness. Beyond the ani-

mated balconies, what was striking was the speed and scale of the first measures taken by our country in response to the consequences of the pandemic disaster. That response was widespread, social and also a cultural expression. The sphere of culture and heritage was the subject of various initiatives. In the places and times that allowed, many online, some hybrid, they multiplied, revealing a submerged world of creators and users. A general overview was creating the potential for further investigation into the Italian world of culture and heritage expressed at that moment. At the same time, it was able to provide information on the role of cultural factors in society at a time of crisis and, in particular, with respect to Disaster Risk Management (DRM).

Sharing the initial intent with a group of colleagues from various disciplinary fields of the Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies, and Planning (DIST) at the Politecnico di Torino – comprising researchers from the two public universities, the Politecnico and the University of Turin – led to the birth of a very articulate project. It allowed each member of that group, each with their own different experiences and cultivating their own interests, to look at the phenomenon through their personal magnifying glass. Some were already involved in research into DRM and brought their experiences. Others were interested in developing more in-depth aspects of studies of various kinds on the city or museums. The common goal was identified as emphasising the expression of urban cultural heritage, the theme of the city being a priority in the research strategies of the MUR department of excellence. The initial group was later joined by early-stage researchers. This large group of researchers includes the authors of the contributions contained in this volume.

The MNEMONIC project also involved colleagues from Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), to support and complement other strategic aspects. It was crucial to jointly define and implement, in order to manage the results of the survey and make them available through an open digital platform. Their work was primarily concerned with the improved and updated finalisation of tools developed with the research group in a previous research. Their participation in the technological outcomes can be found in the development of the platform.

Another significant element defining the introductory framework lay in the cross-sectoral composition of the working group, which included the cultural organisation Polo del Nocecento. This addition was essential in order to discuss the impact of the world of culture on society, which was connected to

the research framework, with operational experts from the cultural sector. It is worth mentioning that this approach operationally permeated the work thanks to the invitation to the director at that time of the Polo del '900, Alessandro Bollo, to take part in the scientific committee.

With these premises and the development of the proposal, the MNEMONIC project “Digital Atlas of the Memory of the Present. Cultural and natural heritage in lockdown Italy” won the department’s tender for large projects. In addition to Alessandro Bollo, the members of the scientific committee are professors Sara Bonini Baraldi, Silvia Chiusano, Cristina Cuneo, Andrea Longhi, Bianca Maria Rinaldi (who were responsible for work packages) and myself as Principal Investigator and coordinator. The Scientific Committee played a constant operational role, with regular monthly meetings to provide updates on the status of the work and the realignment of the goals and schedules based on major unexpected changes due to the resurgence of the pandemic in waves with the corresponding lockdowns.

In relation to the academic component, the areas of work and disciplinary affiliation express the balance of the magnifying glasses through which the survey was carried out: architectural and urban historians (predominant component), aspects relating to museum management, ICT, landscape composition, and the management and organisation of cultural institutions. The Cinzano Dri studio in Turin oversaw the development of the visual identity for the MNEMONIC project.

It should also be noted that other museum institutions and cultural foundations in Turin were indirectly involved. Fondazione Torino Musei shared data and offered support. The Egyptian Museum, then represented by its director Christian Greco, and Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo, represented by its president at that time Francesco Profumo, took part in the first public presentation and discussion of the project’s results, in the presence of the Minister of Culture in office, Senator Dario Franceschini<sup>1</sup>.

The website of MNEMONIC Italian hub of cultural resilience gives an account of the project and outcomes in the Atlas as an open platform acces-

<sup>1</sup> Webinar “The Resilience of Italian Cultural Heritage and the New Digital Challenges” organised by the MNEMONIC project on 21st September 2021, at Politecnico di Torino. Speakers included Dario Franceschini (Minister of Culture), Francesco Profumo (President, Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo), Christian Greco (Director, Museo Egizio, Turin), Alessandro Bollo (Director, Polo del '900), Guido Saracco (Rector, Politecnico di Torino), and Rosa Tamborrino (Coordinator, MNEMONIC Project).

sible to all via the URL <http://www.mnemonic.polito.it/>. The volume includes the entire survey carried out by the working group (Fig. 1).



FIG. 1. The MNEMONIC visual identity and the website of the project, with the Atlas accessible at the URL <http://www.mnemonic.polito.it/>.

They present and discuss the criteria, methods and tools that made it possible to create this extensive collection of data on Italian cities, the motivations and methods that inspired the organisation of the information into databases that can be queried and their georeferencing in a WEBGIS. The approach, the survey method, the criteria for the creation of the digital archive and the prototyping of the mapping with respect to the DRM framework, as defined by the UNDRR, are explained and discussed. The survey comprised the background and developments of the formats mapped in the short term (pre-disaster/post emergency) and identified them where possible.

Here it is possible to consider amendments and “adjustments” to the research carried out in an emergency, and therefore in a situation with developments that are unpredictable. As the initial project unfolded, it had to be adapted and updated on the basis of subsequent events, with other temporary closures and reopening over a period of about two years.

The survey covered different levels of investigation, ranging from the mapping of the national situation to the specifics of a city, Turin, as test case,

through to the analysis of the individual cultural institution. It also included format types in both the virtual and the real worlds. Investigations into digital formats complemented parallel investigations into the spatial scope of the city.

Scales of investigation and format types were identified through detailed investigations and carried out as case studies with specific goals. The volume gives a detailed account of the case studies in dedicated chapters (digital formats on a national scale, spirituality, representation of the city, open spaces, cultural institutions). They relate to researchers with specific research groups, which refer to individual research paths that are independent of this investigation which brought them together.

The outcomes are placed in a study context in which they take on a significance that goes beyond the survey. Compared to the publication of some partial contributions that preceded it<sup>2</sup>, the aim of this volume is to restore diversity to the analytical and interpretative framework, and to the approaches and exploration of different disciplinary and individual contributions. Themes, highlighted in some chapters (multiculturalism, wellbeing) come from the evidence of the outcomes and from the interrogation of the analytical mapping of the Atlas. They show how the information made available by the survey can be used by researchers for further analysis.

The MNEMONIC approach shared with PhD students has also led to extensions of the research method to other contexts. This is reflected in the contribution about Iran, which opens up a comparative reading. In this sense, the volume also intends to define the specificity of its investigation in the method. Compared to other reflections and productions on the topic of culture-COVID in Italy, which were subsequently added to enrich everyone's reflections, the MNEMONIC project presents some specific features in its design. It is a cultural investigation into the city and its very recent developments. However, it is an investigation that was born with the aim of understanding the resilience of culture and its potential in relation to the compelling challenges of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR).

The outcomes make it a significant experience in comparison to other investigations in the international field, as is discussed particularly in the introductory chapter. The admission of the presentation of the project to the

<sup>2</sup> See in particular the contribution R. Tamborrino, et al. *MNEMONIC: atlante digitale della memoria del presente. Il patrimonio culturale e naturale nell'Italia in lockdown*. In M., Bottero, C. Devoti, (eds.), *Il valore del patrimonio: Studi per Giulio Mondini*. Edizioni All'Insegna del Giglio, Sesto Fiorentino 2022, pp. 203-212. DOI 10.36153/heredium03-022.

prestigious annual event of ICOM, held in Prague in August 2022, and the subsequent selection of the report for publication in an ICOM volume, are an effective reflection of this<sup>3</sup>.

The last chapter opens up an area that goes beyond the research project and national borders. It also serves to place the project in a broader and, at the same time, specific working context, in which these themes come to be defined, at least in part, as a possible chapter in the history of cities.

Many history city museums in Europe have created projects on the COVID-19 period, even opening up new formats that include community participation in the construction of museum formats. Traditional formats no longer seem to be satisfactory or at least do not seem to be those best suited to incorporating more recent changes. These museums are united in research because they share the recent history of the city as a complex topic which calls especially for new approaches. At the same time, this theme leads to questions about tools and formats.

MNEMONIC aimed to experiment with the construction of short-term memory (hence the acronym) and build a piece of “urban history” as it unfolds. While the history of the city is a complex subject, recent developments open up forms of participation and hybridisation. The museum collections hybridised with records that are not part of the collections, as well as the “other” cultural products collected in the MNEMONIC Atlas, some of which generated outside cultural institutions and shared in various ways in the real world or via the internet, show aspects of further complexity. They show users turning into producers or co-curators. But also the potential of a new kind of interest and interlocutors, with regard to which the ongoing transitions of a digital society cannot be avoided. Just as we cannot avoid relating it to the global problem of disaster management, which the climate crisis turns into a chronic condition.

Preserving fragile elements such as those produced in an emergency, the MNEMONIC project aimed to offer a study contribution and, with the volume, also a critical reflection, on this variety of emergencies and issues. The creativity and articulations of a sector that includes institutional stakeholders, citizens’ associations and creative industries emerge from the research. It is also a contribution to the identification of the broad spectrum of active

<sup>3</sup> R. Tamborrino, G. Mezzalama, *Italian museums as drivers for social wellbeing: MNEMONIC the Italian digital atlas of cultural resilience*, in J. Vähäpesola, R. Linna (eds.), *Museums, citizens and urban sustainability: 2022*, CAMOC CIMUSET Worklab, 2023, pp. 133-138.

stakeholders highlighted in the appendix to this volume. By defining its potential, the work can aspire to become a benchmark against which new developments such as the momentum of digitisation and innovation in the sector that followed in the recovery phase and was promoted with the Next Generation EU programme, through the projects of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, can be measured.

The digital environment, including the Italian national digital archive and library, is made available to be shared for different types of “curation” and by different “curators”. By bringing together formats produced by specialised producers and many other informal interlocutors, it brings out the variegated Italian world of culture and heritage and its interlocutors (Fig. 2). It is precisely to its flexibility and diversity that we owe its resilience in Italy, despite the absence of specific measures. Its vital production in the emergency period also acted as a form of mitigation in the emergency, offering support during lockdown, and created a bridge to the post-emergency world of culture, heritage and collective spaces.



FIG. 2. Conceptual map of mapped stakeholders with culture and heritage formats.

The desk-research approach of the project is a characteristic feature of the work that makes it a starting point and not an end point. Our ambition

would have been to implement the Atlas with a bottom-up and crowdsourcing approach, but this requires a second level of work, a new collection campaign, with different tools, different timing and different resources. We are ready, if it becomes possible to identify them.

The diversity of the research proposed in the volume and the wealth of information in the Atlas make the criteria and circumstantial mapping of this resilience available for further study. They do not claim to be comprehensive but contain a lot of information and insights at different levels and on certain topics that offer useful elements. These outcomes of MNEMONIC will, we hope, help define a field of work for research into resilience and culture-heritage, and a starting point discussed and contextualised in this volume.

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