

Preserving Cultural Heritage, Enhancing Social Development, and Fostering Sustainable Tourism: The Role of Architecture in Himara's Ancient Castle

Giannenta Milio

Independent researcher, Athens, Greece, mi.janeda@gmail.com

Abstract

Preserving cultural heritage while fostering social development is a crucial challenge faced by many historical sites worldwide. This research explores the intricate relationship between architectural approaches, sustainable tourism, community engagement, and the integration of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles in the preservation and adaptive reuse of Himara's ancient castle.

To assess the fortification's impact on its environment and society, a double materiality assessment will be employed. This approach acknowledges both the material and immaterial dimensions of cultural heritage, considering the urban fabric and its intangible cultural values. Through a comprehensive examination of these aspects, the study aims to ensure that preservation efforts align with the needs and aspirations of the local community. The research will also integrate Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles as a methodology to guide decision-making and planning processes.

By analyzing the architectural approaches and historical context of Himara's ancient castle, the study seeks to identify strategies for preserving cultural heritage while promoting social development. The research will explore the fortification's impact on the local community, such as heritage-based employment, cultural identity, and social cohesion, to foster a deeper understanding of its role in contemporary society.

The study's outcomes aim to inform the broader discourse on heritage preservation and sustainable development, offering practical guidance for preserving the legacy of the past while shaping a prosperous and inclusive future for the local community.

Keywords: heritage preservation, cultural tourism, sustainable urban development.

1. Introduction

Himara is located in the southwestern part of Albania, nestled along the Ionian coast. This picturesque town is surrounded by mountains on three sides while to the south, it opens to the Ionian Sea. Its historical evolution has been significantly influenced by its strategic geographic location, which placed it near key trade routes of its time. The Mediterranean climate has fostered robust agricultural activity, contributing to a thriving local economy. Simultaneously, the rugged mountainous terrain

has shaped the character of the local population and led to the development of fortified settlements. Access to the village of Himara is conveniently provided by the National Road. However, to reach the old town and its ancient ruins, one must pass through narrow, winding pathways ascending the hill. Crowning the summit of this hill is the town's first and oldest settlement, dating back to 2,700 years. This settlement expanded outward in a radial pattern, growing in concentric circles. Meandering

through the mountains, a natural creek acts as a protective barrier for the fortifications, enhancing the picturesque scenery that has inspired countless artists, both local and foreign, over the centuries.

Through an analysis of the typology of the dwellings within the oldest segment of the castle, it becomes apparent that the households exhibited a high degree of self-sufficiency, indicative of a societal structure characterized by a relatively egalitarian hierarchy. The layout of the private living spaces was oriented towards accommodating the requirements of family life while ensuring long-term sustainability. Critical necessities, such as access to water, were met through the utilization of courtyard wells, while sustenance needs were addressed through livestock husbandry and the storage of provisions, either within the ground-level domes of the residences or within underground facilities. The community adhered to a hierarchical structure with minimal stratification. Nevertheless, when examining the size of the residences and their associated land holdings, the presence of more affluent families becomes evident. This observation aligns with a pattern that persists in the contemporary urban and societal framework, more prominent than ever before. The residential buildings within the walls of the castle have no distinct fortified character given the fact that at the time when they were built, there was no risk coming from the Ottoman conquerors, and the disputes within the region had settled.

The Prototype: A building with a square or almost square floor plan and a domed cellar. The cellar was used to store the food supply and for hosting the livestock. The structure was sheltered with a pitched roof.

First generation: It is an evolution of the prototype, an elongated, rectangular building. The entrance to the cellar and upper floor is located on the long side of the house. The axis of the building is oriented east-west, and the entrance is located on the meridian side.

Second generation: The rectangular building evolved acquiring a light partition in the floor plan, which creates two small spaces. The partition was usually a wooden wall that did not reach the ceiling.

Third generation: An additional space is added to the simple rectangular building. A smaller additional space is added to the length of the building.

Fourth generation: The building typology of the fourth generation displays additional spaces on both sides of the original rectangular building.

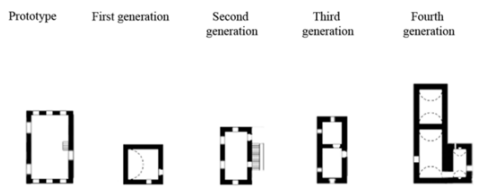


Fig. 1- Sketch of layout categorization for residential buildings (Sketch by the author 2020)

Over the centuries, as the settlement expanded alongside societal development and increasing prosperity, the architectural landscape adapted to meet evolving needs. The town emerged as a harmonious fusion of natural surroundings and human activities, with each house both influencing and benefiting from its neighbouring structures. In recent years, property disputes and corruption have given rise to the construction of simple, cost-effective buildings, resulting in significant damage to the town's urban layout. Despite a history of public protests, the absence of effective legislation and regulation has hindered the emergence of viable solutions. Urban growth has occurred haphazardly over the past two decades, primarily driven by seasonal tourism and economic endeavours, leading to an irregular urban layout. While it is reasonable to make interventions in traditional buildings for maintenance and modernization, it is essential that such changes preserve the architectural essence of the town. Unfortunately, in the case of Himara, hurried reconstructions and inappropriate alterations have led to the erosion of the town's traditional urban character. These transformations have escalated urban density, strained infrastructure, and eroded the historical charm that once defined the town.



Fig. 2- Interventions in a residential building
(Photo by the author, 2020)

2. The Double Materiality Assessment

The current driving forces behind urban development in the region are the swift growth of tourism and the pursuit of financial gain. Notably, the region of Himara has transitioned to a seasonal way of life, where sustainability is no longer a year-round matter but limited to the tourist season. When viewed through the lens of qualitative architectural and urban development, this phenomenon raises critical concerns. Scholars suggest that sustainable tourism and cultural heritage preservation can be achieved through a holistic and integrative approach that considers the economic, social, and cultural aspects of the site. Researchers in Spain - a country that cherishes a great number of World Heritage Sites (Fresneda-Fuentes, Fuentes-Ruiz, Lobo-Gallardo, 2020) propose a model for sustainable management of cultural heritage sites that combines protection and conservation with economic development. They suggest that the financial and heritage dimensions are the ones that garnered the most focus and that sociocultural and environmental dimensions are gaining prominence in management processes. Sustainable tourism's intricate challenges demand a comprehensive stakeholder engagement

approach, especially in lower and middle-income countries. This approach must centre on preserving natural and cultural sites while enhancing the welfare of local communities. Additionally, it should acknowledge the significance of economic sustainability, ethical standards, and social fairness within host communities. The double materiality assessment is a holistic framework applied to Himara's ancient castle, encompassing both its tangible and intangible dimensions of cultural heritage. It involves evaluating the physical structures, historical significance, and urban integration of the castle while also safeguarding its intangible cultural values through community engagement, preservation strategies, and adaptive reuse strategies. It's practically inevitable that cultural sites like the castle in Himara will be targeted for tourism development and financial gain. However, if these initiatives proceed without involving relevant stakeholders, particularly the local community, it can result in exploitation, damage, and risks to these valuable heritage sites. To prevent such outcomes and ensure sustainable development that creates long-lasting value while mitigating harm, it's crucial to emphasise the importance of employing materiality assessments and the strong sustainability approach in decision-making processes. These assessments help consider not only the physical aspects of the site but also its intangible cultural values, fostering a more holistic understanding. By involving stakeholders and adopting strong sustainability principles, decisions can be made that prioritize the site's preservation, minimize negative impacts, and ensure that economic gains are balanced with the long-term well-being of the site and its community. This approach safeguards against the reckless exploitation often associated with tourism-driven development and promotes responsible and sustainable practices.

2.1. The material dimension

The material dimension of cultural heritage refers to tangible aspects such as historic buildings, archaeological sites, and physical artefacts. In the context of the urban fabric, this includes the preservation and adaptive reuse of historical structures, streetscapes, and urban layouts. These physical elements serve as tangible links to the past and contribute to the visual and architectural character of a place. When development plans account for the material dimension, they aim to

protect these assets from deterioration, inappropriate alterations, or outright destruction. This typically involves restoring facades, rehabilitating buildings for modern uses, and maintaining the structural integrity of heritage sites. Helmy and Cooper (Helmy & Cooper 2002) suggest that integrating sustainable development principles into tourism planning and management is essential for mitigating negative impacts on archaeological attractions.



Fig. 3- Detail of the interventions in the urban fabric within the castle (Photo by the author 2020)

Himara's urban fabric embodies centuries of architectural evolution, reflecting the historical, social, and economic dynamics of the region. The tangible aspects of cultural heritage, such as the ancient castle, houses, and religious buildings, contribute to the material dimension of this heritage. To acknowledge the material dimension of cultural heritage, conservation and restoration efforts are crucial. Preservation of traditional construction techniques, materials, and architectural styles can maintain the authenticity of the urban fabric. For instance, restoration projects could focus on using locally sourced stones and traditional building methods to repair historical structures, including the ancient castle. Integrating historical buildings into contemporary urban areas is more than just a

practical solution. Adaptive reuse can convert heritage structures into functional spaces like museums, cultural centres, or event and exhibition spaces. This approach sustains the material heritage by ensuring that old buildings serve contemporary needs. Implementing architectural guidelines within the urban planning process is paramount to the preservation of historical sites. For instance, mandates must require that new construction respects the traditional architectural forms, ensuring continuity in the urban fabric.

2.2. The immaterial dimension

The immaterial dimension of cultural heritage is equally significant. It includes intangible aspects such as traditions, oral histories, rituals, languages, social practices, and values that are passed down through generations. In the context of the urban fabric, this includes the stories and memories associated with particular neighbourhoods, the rituals that take place in public spaces, and the local knowledge about the history and significance of landmarks. Acknowledging the immaterial dimension ensures that the cultural assets and essence of a community are preserved alongside its physical heritage. This is performed through engaging with local residents to understand their narratives, documenting oral histories, and supporting cultural practices that reinforce a sense of continuity. Intangible cultural assets are equally vital, representing the collective memories, stories, rituals, and social practices associated with the region and the specific site. Oral History Preservation should be practised intentionally and in collaboration with local historians and community members to document oral histories and narratives. These stories ought to be preserved through digital platforms, exhibitions, and community events, ensuring that the intangible cultural values are passed onto future generations. Organising cultural festivals and events to celebrate local traditions, music, dances, and culinary practices is a main driver to bring together residents and visitors, fostering a sense of community and social cohesion. Establishing educational programs that promote traditional arts and crafts is a proven method to boost local economies through the activation of the potential of cultural assets. Workshops on traditional weaving, pottery, and other crafts can revive and sustain these skills, nurturing the intangible

cultural heritage. Liu (Liu, 2003) emphasises that ensuring the conservation of cultural heritage, the preservation of traditional values, and the provision of genuine experiences for tourists have consistently been underscored as key components of sustainable tourism.

2.3. Balancing both dimensions

Balancing both dimensions of cultural heritage within the urban fabric requires a nuanced approach. It involves designing development strategies that respect the physical forms of historical buildings while also integrating the intangible aspects that contribute to a community's identity. For instance, when revitalising an old town centre, the restoration of facades and architectural elements should be accompanied by efforts to promote traditional markets, local festivals, and other cultural events that bind the community together. Furthermore, this balanced approach can foster a sense of pride and belonging among residents. When they see that their heritage is respected and celebrated, they are more likely to engage in the ongoing preservation efforts and feel invested in the development of their surroundings. In the case of Himara's urban development, incorporating both dimensions of cultural heritage in the planning process would mean not only conserving the physical structures of the ancient castle but also understanding and respecting the intangible cultural values associated with it. This could involve collaborating with local historians, artists, researchers and community members to identify and document the stories, traditions, and practices that have shaped the castle's significance over time. By simultaneously valuing tangible architectural features and intangible cultural practices, Himara can create an urban environment that resonates with its rich past while embracing a sustainable future. After examining the double materiality of Himara's ancient castle, the next step is to explore adaptive reuse strategies. These approaches creatively and rightfully transform historical sites to meet contemporary needs while preserving heritage. Considering these options, facilitates the alignment with ESG principles and ensures sustainable tourism and urban development. Adaptive Reuse, within the context of Himara's ancient castle and the principles of the double materiality assessment, presents a pragmatic solution. By repurposing historical structures

within the castle, we can seamlessly integrate the town's rich heritage into contemporary urban life ensuring the preservation of both the tangible and intangible cultural values of Himara. Some adaptive reuse strategies and principles for Himara's ancient castle involve:

- A museum and interpretive centre adapting parts of the castle into a museum or interpretive centre that showcases the region's history, culture, and heritage. This can include interactive exhibits and educational programs.
- Cultural events venue that would use the castle as a venue for cultural events such as concerts, theatre performances, and art exhibitions. This has the potential to attract tourists while preserving the site's cultural significance.
- A community space that would allocate space within the castle for community activities, and gatherings. This fosters a sense of ownership among locals and promotes social inclusivity and cohesion.
- Heritage conservation practices that implement strict guidelines and regulations for any adaptive reuse projects to ensure that they respect the historical and architectural integrity of the castle.
- Sustainability practices that incorporate sustainable design elements in adaptive reuse projects, such as energy-efficient lighting, water conservation measures, and the use of locally-sourced materials.
- Public-Private partnerships to drive collaboration with private organisations, NGOs, or international bodies with expertise in heritage preservation to fund and manage adaptive reuse initiatives.
- Educational Programs to develop educational programs and guided tours within the castle to raise awareness about its historical and cultural significance.
- Community engagement practices that involve the local community in decision-making processes regarding adaptive reuse projects to ensure their needs and concerns are addressed.
- Revenue generation strategies to efficiently use revenues generated from adaptive reuse initiatives to fund ongoing maintenance and conservation efforts for the castle.

However, the success of adaptive reuse strategies relies on embracing Environmental, Social, and

Governance (ESG) principles. ESG principles provide the framework for sustainable tourism and urban development. These strategies, when implemented thoughtfully and in alignment with ESG principles, can contribute to the sustainable development and preservation of Himara's ancient castle, while also benefiting the local community and the broader tourism industry. Kumar (Kumar, 2017) asserts that cultural and heritage tourism can play a vital role in promoting sustainable development. However, it must be thoughtfully developed, with active participation and ownership by indigenous communities. It should avoid causing harm to local societies and ecosystems. Cultural tourism has the potential to revitalise cultural traditions, protect local heritage, and foster indigenous cultures and crafts. Therefore, culture and heritage can drive sustainable tourism development, contributing to a harmonious balance in our world through the synergy of tourism and culture.

3. Relevance of ESG principles for Himara's ancient castle

The incorporation of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles serves as a comprehensive framework for decision-making and planning processes in urban development. ESG principles encompass a set of values and criteria that go beyond purely economic considerations. Instead, they emphasize a holistic approach that considers the environmental impact, societal well-being, and effective governance in every decision made. Cultural and sustainable tourism development significantly enhance destination competitiveness (Wardana, Sukaatmadja & Yasa, Astawa, 2019). While ecotourism has no direct impact on competitiveness, it indirectly influences it through sustainable tourism development. Additionally, local community support can moderate the relationship between cultural tourism, ecotourism, and sustainable tourism development. These findings highlight the pivotal role of cultural preservation, the natural and social environment, and local community engagement in both sustainable tourism development and the enhancement of destination competitiveness. In the context of Himara's ancient castle and its surroundings, ESG principles offer practical solutions for a holistic and balanced approach to development:

Environmental (E) Dimension:

ESG principles emphasize the importance of preserving historical sites like Himara's ancient castle. This involves applying sustainable construction and restoration techniques, using locally sourced materials, and minimizing the environmental impact of development. It guides the planning of eco-friendly infrastructure, such as energy-efficient lighting, renewable energy sources, and wastewater management systems, to reduce the environmental footprint of urban expansion. Further, ESG principles aim at incorporating green spaces, gardens, and pedestrian pathways to enhance biodiversity and create sustainable ecosystems within the urban fabric.

Social (S) Dimension:

An ESG framework would facilitate the involvement of the local community, historians, artists, and cultural experts in the planning process. Their insights can contribute to preserving intangible cultural values, stories, and traditions associated with the ancient castle. It is crucial to ensure that development projects provide benefits to all segments of the community, including marginalised groups. Implement accessible infrastructure and amenities that cater to diverse needs. ESG practices encourage the creation of cultural centres and spaces within the urban fabric that celebrate local traditions, arts, and crafts. These spaces can serve as platforms for promoting cultural exchange and education.

Governance (G) Dimension:

Adopting transparent decision-making processes that involve community input and adhere to regulations for heritage preservation is paramount. An ESG framework would serve as a regulator for reporting on development activities ensures accountability. Stakeholder collaboration is another crucial factor of sustainable development. We should aim to facilitate partnerships between government entities, local businesses, NGOs, and community members to create a collective vision for Himara's development that aligns with ESG goals. In long-term planning, an ESG framework would support the development of a comprehensive master plan. Successful planning outlines the preservation, adaptive reuse, and sustainable development of the ancient castle and its surroundings. This plan

should have clear guidelines for architectural interventions and community engagement. ESG principles underscore transparency, accountability, and ethical decision-making. Applying this to Himara's urban development involves establishing clear regulations for heritage preservation, architectural practices, and land use. It also entails promoting participatory governance, where the community has a voice in shaping the development of their surroundings.

4. Conclusions

The double materiality assessment, which encompasses both tangible and intangible aspects of cultural heritage, plays a pivotal role in informing sustainable development practices in Himara's ancient castle and its urban fabric. By considering the physical structures, historical significance, and intangible cultural values, this approach guides preservation, community engagement, and adaptive reuse strategies. The castle's value as a cultural and historical treasure is undeniable, and its sustainable development is

contingent on a holistic understanding of its material and immaterial dimensions. Furthermore, embracing Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles in Himara's urban development is indispensable. These principles offer a comprehensive framework that transcends mere economic considerations, emphasising environmental sustainability, social inclusivity, and effective governance. ESG principles align with the preservation of the castle's tangible and intangible heritage and contribute to Himara's sustainable future. In Himara's journey towards responsible and sustainable urban development, the integration of the double materiality assessment and ESG principles ensures a harmonious balance between preserving the past and building for the future. This approach safeguards against the potential exploitation and damage that can occur in tourism-driven development, fostering responsible practices that benefit the heritage, the environment, the community, and the broader tourism industry.

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