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BRIDGING THE GLOBAL-LOCAL DIVIDE: NAVIGATING CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY IN URBAN HERITAGE MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Cultural sustainability has emerged as a vital dimension of the global sustainability discourse, encompassing efforts to preserve and safeguard cultural heritage amid the challenges posed by urbanization, socio-political transformations, and territorial changes. Despite its growing importance in international frameworks like the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), cultural sustainability remains a fragmented concept, often overshadowed by its economic, social, and environmental counterparts. This study delves into the complex interplay between cultural heritage and sustainability by focusing on two UNESCO urban heritage sites – Venice and Amsterdam. These cities, emblematic of the challenges faced by urban heritage sites worldwide, serve as rich contexts for exploring how cultural sustainability is conceptualized, operationalized, and managed at the local level.

The significance of this research lies in addressing the gap between global cultural sustainability frameworks, such as those advocated by UNESCO, and their practical implementation at the local level. While cultural sustainability has become a focal point in international policy debates, there is limited understanding of how these high-level principles translate into local and actionable policies within urban heritage contexts. By examining the decision-making and evaluation processes in local public administrations, this study sheds light on the unique challenges faced by heritage cities, particularly in balancing heritage preservation with urban development pressures, i.e. right to the city or social housing, and future challenges like climate change or rising sea levels. This research adopts a qualitative approach, grounded in the interpretive tradition, to investigate the nuanced, context-dependent nature of cultural sustainability. The case studies of Venice and Amsterdam were strategically chosen for their rich socio-political and organizational complexities. Venice, examined first as part of the Horizon 2020 project UNCHARTED, highlights the tensions inherent in cultural sustainability as a site at risk of inclusion on UNESCO List of World Heritage in Danger. Amsterdam, introduced later as a comparative case study, broadens the scope to investigate

the assimilation of UNESCO principles in urban heritage sites. The study integrates immersive fieldwork with a detailed analysis of the role of UNESCO as an international meta-organizational agency, tracing how global guidelines are negotiated and implemented locally.

The findings reveal a complex and contested process of translating global cultural sustainability principles into local policies. Both Venice and Amsterdam illustrate the inherent ambiguities in managing urban heritage, particularly in navigating the tensions between conservation and contemporary urban demands. While Venice underscores the risks of policy inaction, Amsterdam highlights opportunities for innovation in integrating heritage management with urban planning. A comparative analysis of the two cases identifies common challenges, such as balancing resident needs with tourism pressures, while also showcasing distinct strategies of action. This study advances the discourse on cultural sustainability by providing a focused, heritage-informed analysis of its practical application in urban settings. The research bridges the gap between global UNESCO frameworks and local governance, offering actionable insights for policymakers, cultural managers, and urban planners. By emphasizing the need for tailored approaches to heritage cities, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of cultural sustainability and its critical role in ensuring the long-term viability of cultural heritage in a rapidly urbanizing world.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Introduction

Cities have played a pivotal role in human development, serving as hubs for revolutionary ideas, such as Renaissance Florence, and acting as portals of exchange between civilizations, like Ottoman Belgrade. They have also been arenas of contention and appropriation, such as post-World War II Berlin. Cities were carefully developed to meet the needs of certain people in certain historical periods, as in the case of Haussmann's renovation of Paris, which followed the need to modernise the French capital. Conversely, cities have also emerged as spontaneous responses to environmental factors, such as the founding of Rome on the seven Roman hills to avoid the marshy lowlands. Cities are symbols of a civilisation, and the loss of these places, whether planned or accidental, is experienced as a collective trauma (e.g. the bombing of Dresden in the Second World War). Over the centuries, the city became the emblem of progress, development and the frontier of innovation. It became the symbol of industrialisation and modern civilisation, beloved and idealized by futurist movements at the beginning of the 20th century. It became synonymous with development and opportunity, especially in the urbanisation flows that have massively involved Western countries since the 1950s. It was from this ground, from a discourse in reaction and contrast to the capitalist commodification of urban spaces, that the concept of the right to the city was born in the late 60s, an idea that promotes the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanisation (Lefebvre, 1996)

In response to this, a prevailing sentiment emerged – one that is evident across the arts, social movements and codified knowledge – that calls for a more nuanced, multidimensional approach to urban life. This perspective advocated for cities to be seen as dynamic spaces open to multiple interpretations, rather than merely as products of the private and public capitalist agendas (for further reading, see (Dear & Scott, 2018; Harvey, 1985). As places of social catalysis, they stand at the forefront of contemporary and future challenges, while carrying the weight of history. Using a modern term that has been very much in vogue over the past two decades, a contemporary major concern

regards how cities can achieve sustainability. In a context where urban areas are shaped by diverse and often conflicting interests and interpretations, the challenge of understanding and implementing sustainability becomes both urgent and complex. Nowadays, sustainability is a crucial element of discussion, defined as the condition of development that ensures that the needs of the present generation are met without compromising the ability of future generations to realise their own.

This concept emerged from environmentalist discussions, first articulated at the 1972 UN Conference on the Environment and later formalized in the Brundtland Report of 1987. As this concept evolved, it was extended to other spheres, as it was soon realised that sectioning actions and relegating them only to the environmental sphere would not be effective, given that the matrix of post-modern society is not based on environmentalist principles (Gare, 1995). Consequently, sustainability was extended to encompass economic and social dimensions, becoming institutionalized in the Agenda 21 in 1992 (Rio Conference, 1992). However, it was not until the 2004 update of Agenda 21 (or Agenda 21 for culture) that it was decided to broaden this definition, as the environmental, economic and social dimensions alone could not reflect the complexity of today's society (UCLG, 2004).

Several voices, including UNESCO, United Cities and Local Governments and the World Summit on Sustainable Development, have proposed to include culture in the sustainable development model, as culture defines the very concept of development and influences people's behaviour (UCLG, 2010). This approach addresses the relationship between culture and sustainable development in two ways: by developing the cultural sector (heritage, creativity, cultural industries, handicrafts, cultural tourism) and by ensuring that culture is integrated into all public policies, especially those related to education, economy, science, communication, environment, social cohesion and international cooperation (UCGL, 2004). Today, cultural sustainability is defined as the efforts in the preservation and safeguarding of cultural heritage in the face of ongoing territorial transformations and socio-political impacts, with a focus on addressing current critical challenges and ensuring its long-term viability (UNESCO, 2013). It is not a coincidence that this expanded definition

of sustainability was, not surprisingly, promoted and promulgated by United Cities and Local Governments (herein UCLG), the umbrella international organisation for cities, local and regional governments, and municipal associations (UCGL, 2004; 2010).

Building on this non-linear, integrative, and contested definition, where peripheral actors exert influence on central perspectives, this thesis seeks to investigate the concept of cultural sustainability and how this is translated at the local level. This doctoral research, therefore, poses the following question: *How has the concept of cultural sustainability evolved, and how is it applied and managed at the local level in urban heritage sites?*

In this thesis, I am to investigate the relationship between local governments and local authorities, as although this concept has been introduced at the international policy level the concept of cultural sustainability is not firmly integrated and shared in policy implementation at the local (and national) level, as evidenced in Agenda 21 for Culture – and its subsequent updates. Therefore, I examine the framework of cultural sustainability at the international level, focusing on UNESCO as a supranational UN agency that plays a regulatory role by producing guidelines and directives for its member states. On the other hand, I analyse the public administration of cities inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, specifically Venice and Amsterdam, where urban governance is complemented by the management of the UNESCO site. In this context, city administrations must handle cultural heritage deemed – according to the international policies of the 1972 UNESCO Convention – to be of universal value and of particular distinction (Outstanding Universal Value).

These conditions are particularly compelling for several reasons. First, the value attributed to a UNESCO site is declared to be universal, signifying its relevance to all humanity (WH Centre, 2005). This universal designation contrasts sharply with other values typically associated with cities, which are usually rooted in local or contextual significance (Vahtikari, 2016). This contrast presents an ontological dilemma in urban management: if the value of a heritage site is universal, who holds the decision-making authority over its development and future? Furthermore, who are the primary stakeholders or "users" of this heritage?

This question becomes even more interesting when considering the widespread contemporary debate regarding cities. Concerns about mass tourism, gentrification, and social housing are burning themes in public and academic discussions (Lees & Phillips, 2018). One of the most recent European initiatives is Smart Cities (EU Commission, 2012), a concept that envisions city sustainability to be implemented through the use of digital solutions and big data (Khang et al., 2023). However, the smart cities discourse only marginally touches on the issue of cultural sustainability, and once again environmental and, above all, economic aspects are prevalent, as smart cities are yet another umbrella term used to convey funding for urban developments (Khang et al., 2023), but not to open up a real critical reflection on what 'going sustainable' means (Ibănescu et al., 2022). Using a multidisciplinary and holistic perspective (i.e., that of cultural sustainability) is, therefore, useful to study not only individual aspects of urban development but also to assess the overall state of the art of the administration of an urban territory.

Lastly, it is crucial to examine the evaluation and decision-making processes within public administration, as it is in the most complex and contentious areas that the strength or weakness of democracy is most evident. Cultural heritage, in this context, represents a particularly complex domain for evaluation and decision-making due to several intrinsic characteristics of these objects – whether they are tangible or intangible (Hoffman, 2006; Zan, 2016). These include the difficulty of commensuration, the interpretative nature of heritage value, and the ambiguous concept of ownership (G. S. Smith et al., 2010) – all of them intertwined with public interest, identity, and the transcendental meaning attributed to cultural heritage. Confronted with such a multifaceted and elusive subject, which resists simple numerical or quantitative rationalization (Carnegie et al., 2022; Carnegie & Wolnizer, 1995), the management processes associated with cultural heritage are far from trivial. This thesis poses that investigating such dynamics is essential for a holistic perspective on the matter, aligning with a tradition of critical management studies in the heritage field. This line of studies is rooted in a critical approach that investigates the issues of organizing (Czarniawska, 2008), delving

into practices and behaviours – interested in what is done rather than what should be done (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985).

This perspective is compelling for the current research topic as it stresses the importance of contextualizing management in local contexts and conditions (March, 1978; Pettigrew, 1987). This also has led to embracing decision-making as an 'uncertain, ambiguous, fragile' process within organizations (Zan et al., 2016, p. 6). Methodologically, the qualitative 'ethnography of administrations' approach (Zan et al., 2016) is beneficial as it provides an in-depth understanding of the subject within its natural setting. Through the disciplinary lens of public management, this thesis employs a level of analysis at the level of local urban governance, allowing for the empirical examination of grounded cases. Moreover, in addressing complexity, a public management viewpoint enables the study of multifaceted environments without spreading the analytical efforts thin over granular issues. The two selected case studies, as described in the methodological section of this thesis, are employed to ground the discussion in practical terms, thus disentangling abstraction and ambiguity.

This discussion extends beyond a mere question of levels of analysis; when delving into the internal functioning of any organization, it implies examining the interactions among various elements involved, such as actions, decisions, actors, and processes (Mintzberg, 1973). This approach to investigating micro and administrative aspects is aligned in two significant ways with a specific perspective on organizational complexity (Ferri & Zan, 2016). First, complexity allows for a range of alternative combinations of inputs, throughputs, and outputs, employing the terminology of complex systems analysis (Zan et al., 2016). Second, complexity itself challenges the cognitive processes of actors, the process of sensemaking (Gioia et al., 1996; Weick, 1993) essential for understanding organizations (Czarniawska, 2008).

This pluralistic and open-ended perspective implies the effort, during fieldwork, to understand specific settings and patterns of action (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). It involves exploring how actors engage in processes of reconstruction that are often uncertain and contested. This approach fits well

within the broader movement to de-emphasize the Western bias in heritage discourses – a shift gaining traction at the international level (e.g. Bandarin, 2007; Jokilehto & Cameron, 2008; Logan, 2012; Meskell, 2013b). A more radical implication of this shift is the recognition of diversity from economic and administrative perspectives. Beyond cultural and heritage diversity, the diversity of administrative heritage significantly influences the other two (Smith et al., 2010). Thus, following this academic tradition stemming from an interpretative approach to administration and organizing, the aim is to capture this variety of practices, particularly in the context of international comparative research. Rather than applying standardized economic models to pre-defined policies, this approach seeks to uncover idiosyncratic practices and the socially constructed meanings of economic processes across various administrative contexts (Zan et al., 2016).

Delving from this perspective, the thesis fills a gap in heritage management studies as the topic considered, urban heritage and cultural sustainability, has never so far been analytically addressed in management studies. The academic literature on cultural sustainability, so far, has primarily approached the topic from a heritage studies perspective (Labadi, 2017). These studies investigated the impact of international policies on heritage designation (Carter & Grimwade, 1997; Lähdesmäki, 2016; Shipley, 2000; Winter, 2014), the effect of heritage designation on heritage preservation (e.g. Askew, 2010; Melubo & Lovelock, 2019; Vecco & Caust, 2020), and the value tensions between international and local interests (Aas et al., 2005a; Müller, 1998; Salazar, 2010a). Yet, these studies are limited by the lack of perspective on the organizational dynamics that lay behind decision-making processes. On the side, management studies delved into city management, investigating specific aspects of cultural sustainability, for example, studying the effect on tourist flows (Aas et al., 2005b; de Oliveira et al., 2024; García-Hernández et al., 2017; Jimura, 2011; Melubo & Lovelock, 2019; Salazar, 2010b; Vecco & Caust, 2020), investigating the value of creative industries (e.g. Grodach, 2013; Markusen, 2014; Pourzakarya & Fadaei Nezhad Bahramjerdi, 2023), or exploring the fascinating topic of festival organizing (Quinn et al., 2021; Richards & Leal Londoño, 2022; A. Smith et al., 2021; Supriono et al., 2023).

A few accounting studies have explored the issue of culture and sustainability (Abeysekera, 2022; Apostol et al., 2023; Komori, 2015; Magliacani, 2023). Nevertheless, it is to be noted that the articles so far published fall short of offering an integrated and comprehensive analysis of cultural sustainability. An interesting attempt to bridge this gap was made by Soini and Birkeland (2014), who adopted an open, multidisciplinary perspective to review existing literature on the matter. However, their work provides a general discussion of cultural sustainability without delving into the practical management issues and the underlying practices. Thus, on the one hand, management studies often present a segmented perspective that overlooks the broader issue of cultural sustainability. On the other hand, multidisciplinary studies struggle to engage deeply with practical management issues at the necessary analytical level. This research advances the field by both consolidating the current knowledge on cultural sustainability and investigating its practical applications. To this end, I adopt an interpretative approach to the public management of cultural sustainability, integrating insights from heritage and conservation studies to offer a more comprehensive understanding.

This study contributes to systematizing the concept of cultural sustainability, integrating both academic and policy discourses into the management studies literature while maintaining a multidisciplinary perspective, particularly within urban heritage contexts. It traces the evolution of cultural sustainability and incorporates insights from cultural management, urban studies, and sustainable development. In this thesis, I contribute to the literature on cultural sustainability from a management perspective by providing a focused, heritage-informed analysis that illustrates how international cultural frameworks, such as those of UNESCO, are translated into complex local realities. Firstly, by examining the case studies of Amsterdam and Venice from a local government perspective, the research addresses a gap in understanding how cultural sustainability policies and practices are interpreted and enacted by local governments. This approach aims to offer a clearer understanding of how cultural sustainability is both conceptualized and operationalized at the local level, emphasizing the critical role of stakeholder engagement in achieving cultural sustainability.

Second, this study explores the role of UNESCO as an international regulatory and policy-making actor, shedding light on the processes through which international directives are negotiated, adapted, and sometimes contested by national and municipal authorities. This analysis adds depth to existing studies on local governance by examining how different governance models influence the local implementation of UNESCO's heritage principles. Lastly, this thesis underscores the unique contributions of heritage sites to the debate on cultural sustainability, as they present emblematic tensions and illustrative processes (as seen in the cases of Amsterdam and Venice) where key issues emerge. This heritage-centred perspective extends the urban sustainability discourse, emphasizing that effective implementation requires transcending short-term political and economic considerations in favour of a holistic approach where culture is integrated into all sustainability actions. Overall, this thesis seeks to provide a clearer understanding of how cultural sustainability can be effectively managed in urban heritage settings, offering insights that may inform future policies for cities worldwide aiming to sustain their cultural heritage in a rapidly evolving urban landscape. The research offers valuable insights for city planners, administrators, and cultural managers on balancing heritage preservation with urban challenges.

The structure of the thesis develops as follows. Chapter 1 explores the concept of cultural sustainability through its emergence in the academic debate and subsequently explores its origins, which go back to the very beginnings of UNESCO. The grey literature review offered in this thesis lays the foundation for the two case studies introduced in this thesis, which are presented in Chapters 3 and 4. Before delving into the case studies, Chapter 3 presents the methodology employed in this research, providing an overview of the research context (UNESCO and its functioning), the data employed (Data Collected) and the analytical processes applied (Data Analysis). Thereafter, Chapter 3 delves into the case study of Amsterdam and its UNESCO World Heritage Site ‘Seventeenth-Century Canal Ring Area of Amsterdam inside the Singelgracht’. This chapter highlights the adaptive governance of Amsterdam, which integrates UNESCO principles with local needs through stakeholder involvement and flexible governance. In Chapter 4, a second case study, the case of

Venice and its UNESCO site ‘Venice and its Lagoon’, is discussed, offering a triangulation with Amsterdam. This chapter presents how Venice, in a recent – and still ongoing – dispute with UNESCO over the preservation of the site, is affected by public management that prioritises short-term economic interests over cultural sustainability, causing tensions between local and UNESCO objectives. The concluding chapter discusses how the two cases compare, highlighting how adaptive governance offers a more cohesive approach while fragmented strategies struggle to balance local and global objectives.

1. Literature Review

The primary aim of this chapter is to explore how the concept of cultural sustainability has evolved over the years, offering a clarification on how cultural sustainability is defined both in the academic and policy domains. Notably, the term "cultural sustainability" is a relatively recent concept that has only gained prominence in the past two decades (Hawkes, 2001). Despite the most recent interest in the topic (Järvelä, 2023), the concept remains ambiguous, still reflecting the challenges of its integration into both academic discourse and practical policymaking (Soini & Dessein, 2016).

Today, cultural sustainability is discussed in scholarly terms, yet it is significantly underexplored compared to the more established pillars of sustainability: social, environmental, and economic (Burford et al., 2013). While these dimensions have been extensively analysed in management studies (Purvis et al., 2019), cultural sustainability occupies only a marginal space in the discourse (Soini & Dessein, 2016). This gap highlights the need for deeper investigation into its theoretical foundations and practical applications to uncover the potential of culture as an essential component of sustainable development (Dessein et al., 2015). Often referred to as a potential fourth pillar (Hawkes, 2001), the inclusion of culture in sustainability frameworks reflects a growing acknowledgement of its multidimensional role in shaping sustainable futures (Burford et al., 2013). Despite this recognition, however, the role of culture in sustainability remains poorly defined (Labadi, 2017) and is subject to varying interpretations across academic disciplines and policy contexts (Soini & Birkeland, 2014). This chapter aims to clarify and expand upon the discourse surrounding cultural sustainability, identifying key themes and perspectives to bridge the gaps between academic research and policymaking.

Historically, including culture within sustainability debates has been limited and peripheral. Early sustainability frameworks, such as the Brundtland Report (Brundtland, 1987), prioritized ecological and economic concerns, often neglecting cultural dimensions (Throsby, 1995). Over time, efforts by organizations like the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

(herein UNESCO) have brought greater attention to cultural considerations, particularly in areas such as heritage preservation and cultural diversity (Bergman et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2017; United Nations, 2017). Nevertheless, the integration of culture into sustainable development agendas has remained fragmented, requiring further investigation into its conceptual and practical dimensions.

Since cultural sustainability is a relatively modern concept, this chapter does not attempt to impose it on earlier frameworks retroactively. Instead, it seeks to trace the origins of the concept and its gradual development. The chapter begins by examining contemporary understandings of cultural sustainability, offering insights into how the term has been acquired and defined within scholarly discourse. It then explores the evolution of the concept within UNESCO, an approach that is crucial for understanding not only the theoretical underpinnings of cultural sustainability but also its practical implications. By studying the role of UNESCO in shaping the concept, this chapter provides a benchmark for assessing the policy development of cultural sustainability. The analysis underscores the importance of bridging the academic and practical dimensions of sustainability, highlighting the potential for cultural sustainability to serve as a transformative framework for future policymaking.

1.1 The Intrinsic Ambiguity of the Concepts of Sustainability, Culture, and Cultural Heritage

The Concept of Sustainability in its Evolving Understanding

The notions of "sustainability" and "sustainable development" are frequently used in public policy and academic research, yet they remain contested concepts (Ruggerio, 2021). Critics often highlight the ambiguity of their meanings and their inconsistent practical application. UNESCO distinguishes the two concepts as sustainability is a long-term goal, while sustainable development refers to the many processes and pathways to achieve it (UNESCO, 2013). More specifically, though, the concept of sustainability was defined in 1987, when the United Nations Brundtland Commission addressed it as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987, p. 37). Nevertheless, fundamental questions – such as what

sustainability entails and what it means to be sustainable – persist as open debates (Ruggerio, 2021). Over the past three decades, sustainability has evolved into a widely recognized keyword, serving as a conceptual bridge between science, policy, and society (Kajikawa et al., 2014; Kates, 2011; Lundgren, 2021). Sustainable development encompasses multiple dimensions, but the environmental aspect dominates both academic research and policy discourse (Bergman et al., 2018; Kajikawa et al., 2014; UNESCO, 2017).

The breadth and vagueness of the concept (Dryzek, 2013) have led to a multifaceted understanding of sustainability, ranging from narrowly focused inquiries to more expansive frameworks (Miller et al., 2014; Purvis et al., 2019). This diversity is evident in sustainability research, which spans from peripheral studies touching on aspects of sustainability to the more established domain of sustainability science. Emerging in the early 2000s, sustainability science aimed to examine and address the fundamental interactions between nature and society while enhancing societal capacities to steer these interactions toward sustainable trajectories (Kates, 2011). Despite its prominence, sustainability as a concept is often left undefined or only vaguely addressed in the literature. Scholars acknowledge its contextual and value-laden nature, describing it as an evolving political construct open to reinterpretation and debate (Bill Hopwood et al., 2005; Meadowcroft, 2007). While the understanding of sustainability as a social goal for people to co-exist on Earth over a long period of time that is structured on a three-pillar model of sustainable development – encompassing economic, social, and environmental dimensions – has been institutionalized (Purvis et al., 2019), complementary dimensions have also been proposed, e.g. including space and time (Seghezzo, 2009), animal welfare and rights (Vinnari & Vinnari, 2022) and, as this chapter investigates, culture.

Defining Culture and Cultural Heritage

Just as the concept of sustainability is broad and ambiguous, so too is the notion of culture (Zimmermann, 2012). This concept is widely used across various scientific disciplines and in public

policy (Alasuutari & Kangas, 2020). UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001b) defines culture as "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of society or a social group" (UNESCO, 2001b, p. 62) encompassing not only art and literature but also lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs. Cultural heritage, therefore, consists of tangible and intangible assets transmitted from one generation to the next (Blake, 2015; Francioni & Vrdoljak, n.d.; Labadi, 2013). Culture is both temporally cumulative and spatially localized, with cultural heritage serving as a source of identity tied to specific places and as a justification for its preservation (de Marco et al., 2018; UNESCO WH Centre, 1972). For the purposes of this study, it is crucial to understand heritage as the transfer of culture to future generations, where the present serves (Auclair & Fairclough, 2015)st and the future (Auclair & Fairclough, 2015).

Historically, in pre-modern times, culture referred to action within real-life worlds and interactions with nature, aspects that remain relevant in its anthropological sense today (Zimmermann, 2012). With the advent of modernity, culture came to signify the cultivation of the mind and, later, the cultivation of humanity itself (McKeon & Williams, 1977). Tracing the evolution of the concept, McKeon and Williams identified three primary meanings that have become widely adopted in both research and policy: culture as a general process of intellectual, spiritual, or aesthetic development; culture as a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity as a whole; and culture as works and practices of intellectual or artistic activity. These meanings are often distilled into two overarching definitions: the broader definition encompasses a way of life that includes all domains of human existence, while the narrower definition focuses on the arts, encompassing intellectual, spiritual, or aesthetic development and its results.

From these perspectives, three representations of culture can be identified (Soini & Dessein, 2016). According to the first perspective, culture is viewed as a general process of intellectual, spiritual, or aesthetic development alongside the outputs of intellectual and artistic labour, which can also be conceptualized as cultural capital in the Bourdieusian sense. The second representation frames culture as a way of life, whereby culture governs all spheres of human existence, reflecting and

imbuing meaning into the environment. The third representation adopts the broadest perspective, encompassing the entirety of human and social life. This perspective extends to semiosis – the study of signs and symbols – and their various influences on intentional and unconscious behaviour, as well as on actions within human social life (Geertz, 1973). This thesis aligns with the perspective that culture, and by extension cultural heritage, is based on three elements (L. Smith, 2006): the aesthetic dimension, which encompasses the sensory aspects of heritage – those features that impact the senses; the social dimension, which addresses the relationship between a society and its context – how a social context influences heritage and, in turn, is shaped by it; and the value dimension – which revolves around the constructivist idea that value is socially attributed to heritage.

Cultural Sustainability: Toward a Definition

The relationship between sustainability and culture has gained increasing attention in academic and policy contexts, particularly in recent years (Wiktor-Mach, 2020). While both concepts are complex and debated individually, their integration has emerged as a key area of interdisciplinary research (Soini & Dessein, 2016). Cultural sustainability, as a term, reflects this intersection but is challenging to define due to the breadth and ambiguity inherent in both "culture" and "sustainability." In the past decade, culture has received recognition as an autonomous dimension within the sustainability discourse, evolving from its traditional categorization under social sustainability (Hawkes, 2001; Soini & Birkeland, 2014). Despite this, it has been often (Mason & Turner, 2020; Roberts, 2023)nability (Mason & Turner, 2020; Roberts, 2023) or interpreted as applying environmental, economic, and social sustainability frameworks to cultural contexts (Labaronne & Piber, 2020). This thesis adopts an approach advocated by Soini and Dessein (2016), which calls for explicitly integrating culture into sustainability discourses. This integration acknowledges that human values, actions, and behaviours, all culturally rooted, are fundamental to achieving sustainability goals.

Although scholars and policymakers are increasingly interested in integrating sustainability and culture, this task remains particularly challenging (Hosargrahar, 2017). Compared to

environmental aspects of sustainability, cultural analysis often necessitates specific qualitative methods that are difficult to measure and standardize, frequently resulting in the exclusion of culture from analyses (Proctor, 1998). On the other hand, the concepts of culture and sustainability are inherently interconnected: culture can be viewed both as a fundamental component of societal development and as an outcome of it (De Beukelaer, 2013), making it complex to explore and delineate the relationship between the two. Moreover, by the definition of culture previously discussed, in the concept of culture the idea of sustainability is, by its own nature, embedded. Therefore, one could argue that there cannot be sustainability without culture.

If sustainability has often been framed as an integration across ecological, economic, and social dimensions (Connelly, 2007), with typical areas of study including environmental conditions, social structures, economic viability, and governance frameworks (Bruyninckx, 2006; Happaerts & Bruyninckx, 2014); incorporating culture into the sustainability discourse would imply a redefinition of the concept of sustainability itself (Dessein et al., 2015). In this context, the approach by Soini and Birkeland (2014) is particularly compelling. They conceptualize cultural sustainability and culture in sustainability as boundary objects (Star & Griesemer, 1989). These ideas are subject to social, political, and scientific processes of negotiation, interpretation, and adaptation, resisting any definitive definition (Star, 2010). Drawing on the work of Hirsch Hadorn et al. (2006), they argued that addressing the conceptual complexity of culture's roles and meanings in sustainable development requires an interdisciplinary and, to some extent, transdisciplinary approach. Soini and Birkeland (2014), through an analysis of peer-reviewed literature employing the concept of cultural sustainability, identified seven distinct narratives of cultural sustainability and proposed three roles for culture in sustainable development. These roles, which may also be understood as representations (Connelly, 2007), reflect different ways in which culture intersects with the broader sustainability discourse.

This concept was expanded by Soini & Dessein (2016), for which there are three main representations of cultural sustainability. The first representation envisions culture as an independent

pillar of sustainability, referred to as the fourth pillar (Hawkes, 2001; Wiktor-Mach, 2020). In this conceptualization, cultural sustainability stands alongside ecological, social, and economic dimensions, emphasizing the need to preserve and maintain cultural capital in its diverse forms, including arts, heritage, knowledge, and cultural diversity, for future generations. This perspective underscores the distinct and vital contributions of culture, separate from those of social sustainability. In the second representation, culture is framed as a mediating force in the pursuit of economic, social, and ecological sustainability (Cicerchia, 2021; Throsby, 1995). This view highlights tangible and intangible cultural elements as essential resources for local and regional economic development. It also emphasizes the importance of incorporating cultural values and perceptions when addressing sustainability goals, particularly those tied to ecological and social dimensions. The third representation takes a broader view, positioning culture as the foundation for achieving overall sustainability (Dessein et al., 2015). In this perspective, termed 'culture as sustainability,' culture transcends and integrates the other pillars, becoming a superordinate dimension that guides and orchestrates sustainable action. This representation imagines a civilization where sustainability is deeply embedded within cultural practices and values, leading to what some describe as an eco-cultural paradigm. Therefore, they postulate that as a mediator, culture facilitates balance and coordination among ecological, social, and economic imperatives, providing a contextual and framing function. When viewed as the foundation for sustainability, culture integrates and harmonizes all aspects of sustainable development, offering a transformative vision where traditional distinctions between economic, social, and environmental dimensions begin to blur. Recognizing culture as both a root of human decision-making and a general concern enables a new paradigm in sustainable development thinking, where culture and sustainability are inextricably intertwined.

In different disciplines, schools of thought, political objectives, cultural contexts, and historical periods, different definitions of culture have been employed (Alasuutari & Kangas, 2020; McKeon & Williams, 1977). Before looking at the UNESCO context and use of this term, it is worth mentioning the use of this term in the policy and governance contexts, which are paramount for the

critical development of this research. To date, the relationship between culture and sustainability has been addressed primarily – and most explicitly – within the framework of international cultural policy (Wiktor-Mach, 2020), as demonstrated by key initiatives such as the UCLG Declaration (2010), Agenda 21 for Culture (2004), the Rio+20 outcomes (2012), and the European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage (2019). However, cultural dimensions have also been implicitly incorporated into certain environmental policies, such as the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2030 (2021), and biodiversity conservation policies that recognize the rights and roles of Indigenous peoples (Handayani et al., 2018), as reflected in instruments like the Convention on Biological Diversity (1992) and the Paris Agreement (2016). Despite these efforts, cultural considerations remain conspicuously absent from many other policy domains.

The domain of public policy-making related to cultural activities and the arts typically emphasizes fostering processes and institutions that promote cultural diversity (Bertacchini et al., 2011; Härkönen et al., 2018; Logan, 2012), enhance access to cultural works and experiences (i.e. Getzner, 2020; and Stylianou-Lambert et al., 2014), and support the expressions of all communities (Li et al., 2021; Luonila et al., 2023), particularly Indigenous peoples and those representing significant cultural heritage (Handayani et al., 2018; Melubo & Lovelock, 2019; Roslan et al., 2021; Thimm, 2019). Nevertheless, such efforts are insufficient for embedding a comprehensive perspective on cultural sustainability (Duxbury et al., 2016). From this viewpoint, cultural sustainability must extend beyond the boundaries of cultural policy to become a central consideration across all policy fields (Soini & Dessein, 2016), encompassing the varied spheres of human life that are invariably shaped by cultural influences. This approach necessitates the development of cross-sectoral policies that inherently integrate sustainability principles (Throsby, 1995).

In the realm of governance, integrating cultural sustainability into governance frameworks can manifest through various patterns, each characterized by distinct modes and orders of governance. Governance, in this context, is defined as the entirety of interactions in which public and private agents engage to address societal challenges and create opportunities, grounded in institutional

contexts and supported by a normative foundation (Bevir, 2012; Kooiman, 2003). According to Kooiman (2003), governance can be categorized into three principal modes. The first is hierarchical governance, emphasizing the directive role of the state in steering governance processes. The second, co-governance, entails horizontal cooperation among diverse actors. The third mode, self-governance, pertains to the capacity of individuals or communities to organize and regulate themselves, collaboratively formulating their own collective solutions. Kooiman also delineates governance across three orders. First-order governance involves the day-to-day operational activities of governing. Second-order governance pertains to the institutional frameworks within which first-order governance occurs, positioning these institutions as objects of governance themselves. Finally, meta-governance addresses the norms and overarching principles that guide governance as a whole.

In the sphere of cultural sustainability, governance has predominantly been addressed through hierarchical models, exemplified by governmental cultural policies in areas such as heritage conservation and the arts (Lähdesmäki, 2016; Sokka et al., 2021). While there have been efforts to advance the public discourse to include co-governance and self-governance, much of the discussion remains confined to meta-governance or first-order governance (Gjaltema et al., 2020). This limitation hinders progress toward engaging with a meso-level of analysis – where everyday activities and practical needs become the focal point of governance (Ghirardello et al., 2022; Rosetti, 2022). This observation underscores the need to engage academic research at a practical level, addressing what cultural sustainability concretely entails within the policymaking process and governance structure.

1.2 The Rise and Evolution of the Concept of Cultural Sustainability form an International Policy Perspective: UNESCO

To gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of cultural sustainability – not only within the confines of academic discourse but also in relation to policymaking – this section sheds light on the evolution of the concept of cultural sustainability within UNESCO. As the United Nations agency

that has been instrumental in the development and establishment of this concept, UNESCO continues to play a central role in advocating for the 2030 Agenda. This advocacy spans both the broader goals of sustainability and sustainable development, as well as the more specific integration of sustainability into its foundational principles. The chapter continues by exploring the key milestones and pivotal documents where the concept of culture – already intrinsically intertwined with sustainability – has been addressed. It then examines the moment when cultural sustainability emerged as a distinct and formalized concept in international discourse. Finally, the last section looks at how UNESCO has operationalized the idea of cultural sustainability, outlining how the organization currently understands and applies this evolving concept within its framework.

Antecedents and Crisis: The Foundation of UNESCO and the Early Efforts to Safeguard Cultural Heritage (1945–1972)

The devastation wrought by World War II not only caused unimaginable human suffering but also resulted in the widespread destruction of cultural heritage. Historical monuments, libraries, and other symbols of cultural identity were deliberately targeted in acts of war, underscoring the need for an international mechanism to protect cultural resources (UNESCO, n.d.). In this post-war climate, UNESCO was founded in 1945 to rebuild a war-torn world through international collaboration in education, science, culture, and communication (UNESCO, n.d.). This section explores the early efforts of UNESCO to establish cultural sustainability as a key component of global development, culminating in pivotal legal instruments to protect cultural heritage (Meskell, 2013b).

The creation in 1945 of UNESCO was deeply influenced by the recognition that peace must be founded on intellectual and moral solidarity, not merely political and economic agreements. The founding constitution of this international UN agency emphasized that the ignorance of each other's ways and lives has been a common cause of the suspicion and mistrust that fuels war (Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 1945). From its inception, UNESCO's mission included preserving cultural heritage considered to be significant for all human beings (later called World Heritage, herein WH) as a means to foster mutual understanding among

nations and rebuild societies ravaged by conflict (Lerch & Buckner, 2018). One of the organization's earliest initiatives was to address the destruction of heritage sites and artefacts which had been targeted during World War II. By framing cultural heritage as a universal legacy transcending borders, UNESCO laid the groundwork for its later conventions. Its efforts were guided by the belief that safeguarding cultural heritage contributes not only to preserving history but also to promoting peace and security in the present and future.

A few years later, a cornerstone of the early work of UNESCO was its role in drafting and promoting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 (UN General Assembly, 1948). The declaration enshrined cultural and educational rights as fundamental to human dignity. Article 27 of the UDHR proclaimed the "right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts, and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits." This marked a critical moment in the conceptualization of cultural rights. At this stage, cultural rights, as articulated in the UDHR and subsequent instruments, encompassed multiple dimensions. These include: The right to cultural participation, allowing individuals and communities to engage with and contribute to cultural life; The right to benefit from scientific progress and its applications, emphasizing the link between cultural advancement and technological innovation; To benefit from the protection of the moral and material interests (also cited in Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights of 1966 of the UN General Assembly). These rights were pivotal in framing culture not merely as an artistic endeavour but as a comprehensive dimension of human development. They also reinforced the broader mandate of UNESCO to integrate cultural considerations into global policies for peace and sustainable development.

Subsequently, in 1954, UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (UNESCO, 1954), a direct response to the wartime destruction of cultural sites. The convention established legal mechanisms to safeguard cultural heritage during times of war. Signatories committed to refraining from using cultural sites for military purposes and to preventing theft and vandalism of cultural property. The 1954 Convention was the

first major international treaty to explicitly link cultural preservation with broader humanitarian goals. These principles align with modern Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Target 11.4: Strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage, and Target 4.7: Promoting education for sustainable development, which includes understanding and valuing cultural diversity (UN, 2015). By emphasizing the protection of cultural property, the convention recognized that heritage is integral to the identity and resilience of communities, especially during and after armed conflicts.

This first phase of the establishment of cultural rights and norms is concluded by the adoption of the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (UNESCO, 1970). This treaty aimed to curb the illegal trade in cultural property, which often disproportionately affected developing nations whose heritage was at risk of being looted or exported without consent. The 1970 Convention reinforced the notion of cultural heritage as a shared responsibility. Today, it aligns to SDG 16 (Peaceful and Inclusive Societies) by addressing the role of cultural heritage in fostering social cohesion and justice (UN, 2015). Overall, the period from 1945 to 1972 marked a formative era in the evolution of cultural sustainability within UNESCO. From the devastation of World War II to establishing key conventions, the early commitments of UNESCO laid the foundation for recognizing cultural heritage as a vital component of global development. These initiatives not only addressed the immediate challenges of cultural loss but also provided a framework for integrating culture into broader efforts to achieve peace, equity, and sustainability. By embedding cultural rights into international law and policy, UNESCO established itself as a global reference for the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage.

The Institutionalization of the 1972 Convention and the World Heritage List

Adopting the 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention marked a pivotal moment in the global recognition of cultural and natural heritage as essential assets for humanity. Building on the earlier

efforts enacted by UNESCO, the Convention established a comprehensive framework for the identification, protection, and preservation of sites deemed to have Outstanding Universal Value (herein after OUV) to humanity. This section explores the institutionalization of the WH Convention, its key mechanisms, and its broader impact on cultural sustainability and international cooperation.

A pivotal step in the evolution in the concept of cultural sustainability is the establishment of the WH Convention in 1972 (UNESCO WH Centre, 1972). The primary objective of the Convention was to create a unified international framework for safeguarding heritage against various global threats, including armed conflict, environmental degradation, and climate change (Francioni, 2008). Recognizing the intrinsic links between cultural and natural heritage, the Convention established mechanisms designed to identify sites of exceptional cultural, historical, scientific, or natural significance. These mechanisms also aimed to protect such sites through robust legal, technical, and financial measures and to ensure their preservation for future generations by fostering sustainable management practices. This approach represented a unique multidisciplinary effort, integrating political, environmental, and socio-economic considerations to address the complexities of heritage conservation. It tackled not only the physical protection of sites but also broader challenges, such as the pressures of modern development and resource degradation. By connecting heritage preservation with the principles of sustainable development, the Convention, nowadays, directly supports SDG Target 11.4, which focuses on safeguarding the world's cultural and natural heritage (UN, 2015).

A defining feature of the 1972 Convention was the creation of the World Heritage List, which serves as a global inventory of sites recognized for their Outstanding Universal Value (UNESCO WH Committee, 2021b). Sites inscribed on the list benefit from increased visibility, funding opportunities, and international support for their conservation. The objective of the WH List is, still today, to establish a common ground between the member states to assess their duty of "ensuring the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of the cultural and natural heritage situated on its territory. [..] [The State] will do all it can to this end, to the utmost of its own resources and, where appropriate, with any international assistance and co-

operation, in particular, financial, artistic, scientific and technical, which it may be able to obtain" (Article 4, UNESCO WH Centre, 1972).

To address sites facing severe threats, the Convention also established the List of World Heritage In Danger, a parallel list that creates a special status enabling urgent intervention and resource mobilization (Brown et al., 2019). The list might include "only such property forming part of the cultural and natural heritage as is threatened by serious and specific dangers, such as the threat of disappearance caused by accelerated deterioration, large-scale public or private projects or rapid urban or tourist development projects; destruction caused by changes in the use or ownership of the land; major alterations due to unknown causes; abandonment for any reason whatsoever; the outbreak or the threat of an armed conflict; calamities and cataclysms; serious fires, earthquakes, landslides; volcanic eruptions; changes in water level, floods and tidal waves" (Article 11, UNESCO WH Centre, 1972). The List of WH In Danger was established to help and support sites in specific conditions, though, through the years, the inclusion in this list brought with it additional meanings that are later explored in Chapter 4 (Brown et al., 2019; Hølleland et al., 2019).

The inaugural inscriptions to the WH List in 1978 marked a pivotal moment in the global recognition and preservation of heritage. The first 12 sites showcased the extraordinary diversity and richness of the world's cultural and natural heritage, featuring landmarks such as the Great Wall of China, the Galápagos Islands, and the Historic Centre of Rome (UNESCO General Assembly, 1978). These foundational entries established benchmarks for subsequent nominations, reflecting the commitment of UNESCO to representing a wide spectrum of humanity's shared legacy. The inclusion of these sites also underscored the dual emphasis of the Convention on both cultural and natural heritage, embodying its holistic vision of preservation. This integrated approach has continued to guide its mission, and by 2023, the WH List had expanded to include over 1,150 sites (Askew, 2010). These sites range from monumental architectural achievements and historic cities to diverse landscapes and fragile ecosystems, collectively illustrating the interconnected heritage of humankind. Overall, the creation of the Convention was instrumental in emphasizing that heritage preservation

was not an isolated endeavour but a shared global responsibility (Caust & Vecco, 2017; Meskell, 2013a).

Building on the framework established by the 1972 WH Convention, UNESCO progressively developed additional instruments to address emerging challenges in heritage protection and preservation in an effort to standardize cultural policies across the signatory countries (Alasuutari & Kangas, 2020). These initiatives reflected the evolving understanding of heritage in a rapidly changing world and sought to reinforce the foundations of sustainable cultural practices. In 1980, UNESCO adopted the Recommendation on the Status of the Artist (UNESCO General Assembly, 1980), which recognized the vital role of artists as custodians of cultural expression and innovation. This recommendation advocated for improved professional, social, and economic conditions for artists, emphasizing their contribution to sustaining and revitalizing cultural traditions. By highlighting the importance of supporting cultural workers, UNESCO underscored their indispensable role in preserving and advancing heritage and creativity. Two decades later, the 2001 Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2001a) extended the principles of the 1972 Convention to include heritage submerged beneath the sea, such as shipwrecks and submerged ruins. These developments, alongside the ever-expanding WH List, are witnesses of how UNESCO was able to adapt, passing from and heritage-cantered and rather conservationist perspective to a more adaptive and forward-thinking approach to heritage protection. Overall, the process of institutionalising the 1972 WH Convention and the subsequent development of related instruments underscored the leading role of UNESCO in integrating cultural heritage into global sustainability efforts.

The Ongoing Transition: From Intangible Heritage to Sustainable Development

In 2003, UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, marking a transformative moment in the global understanding of heritage (UNESCO, 2003). This groundbreaking instrument expanded the definition of heritage to include intangible dimensions such

as oral traditions, rituals, performing arts, and knowledge systems. By emphasizing the living and dynamic aspects of heritage, the Convention shifted the focus from static monuments and sites to practices that are deeply embedded in the daily lives of communities (Janse, 2023). This reorientation underscored the importance of intangible cultural heritage in fostering cultural diversity, social cohesion, and sustainable development (Lázaro Ortiz & Jiménez de Madariaga, 2022). The 2003 Convention also established connections with key Sustainable Development Goals. For instance, it directly supports SDG 4.7, which promotes education for sustainable development by valuing traditional knowledge and cultural practices, and SDG 11, which emphasizes sustainable cities and communities by reinforcing cultural identity and social cohesion (UN, 2015). In 2016, the adoption of Chapter 6 of the Operational Guidelines provided further clarity to State Parties in tackling intangible heritage, offering specific guidance and toolkits on integrating intangible heritage into sustainable development strategies (WH Centre, 2016). These directives highlighted the transformative potential of safeguarding intangible heritage in enriching education, fostering social inclusion, and advancing environmental stewardship.

Building on the principles laid out in the 2003 Convention, UNESCO introduced the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (UNESCO, 2005). This Convention expanded the scope of cultural diversity, focusing on the economic and social dimensions of cultural expression. It recognized the role of cultural industries as key drivers of sustainable development, contributing significantly to multiple SDGs. For instance, it aligns with SDG 4 by enhancing access to quality education through diverse cultural perspectives, and with SDG 5 by promoting gender equality in cultural production and participation (UN, 2015). Moreover, it supports SDG 8 by encouraging decent work and economic growth in cultural sectors, SDG 10 by addressing inequalities through equitable access to cultural resources, and SDG 16 by fostering peaceful and inclusive societies through cultural dialogue (UN, 2015). Additionally, the Convention established the International Fund for Cultural Diversity (IFCD), which provides financial support for projects that advance cultural diversity and sustainable development. To ensure accountability

and knowledge-sharing, a quadrennial periodic reporting system was introduced to monitor the WH sites (WH Centre, 2005).

In 2011, UNESCO took a further step by adopting the Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) (UNESCO, 2011). This framework proposed an integrated approach to urban heritage conservation, urging cities to consider cultural heritage within broader urban planning processes (Rey Pérez & González Martínez, 2018). By linking conservation efforts with sustainability goals, the HUL framework resonated with objectives outlined in the New Urban Agenda and SDG 11, which aims to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. The HUL approach advocates for a balance between heritage preservation and contemporary urban development, ensuring that cultural heritage remains a living and evolving component of modern urban life. The period following 2011 marked a significant phase in UNESCO's efforts to align cultural heritage frameworks with the broader global sustainability agenda. The 2015 World Heritage Sustainable Development Policy represented a critical step in embedding the principles of sustainable development within the management of WH Sites (WH Centre, 2015). By aligning heritage conservation with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the policy emphasized the integration of environmental, social, and economic dimensions into heritage processes. Further advancements finally came in 2016 when UNESCO actively encouraged the incorporation of intangible cultural heritage into national development policies and legislation (WH Centre, 2016). These directives underscored the potential of intangible heritage and, more broadly, of living heritage to act as a catalyst for sustainable development, advocating for its inclusion in education, environmental initiatives, and social policies. In 2019, UNESCO evaluated the WH Reactive Monitoring process to address challenges related to the List of WH In Danger (WH Centre, 2019). This evaluation refined operational guidelines, improving the effectiveness of responses to emerging threats while reinforcing the relevance of heritage conservation in dynamic global contexts.

The recognition and safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage have profoundly reshaped global perspectives on cultural sustainability. The conventions, recommendations, and guidelines

promoted by UNESCO have progressively expanded the scope of heritage protection, moving beyond physical monuments to embrace the dynamic interplay between cultural practices, identities, and sustainable development. By fostering diversity and inclusion, UNESCO has not only enriched the understanding of heritage but also strengthened its role as a cornerstone of global sustainability (Bergman et al., 2018; Sewell, 2015). These efforts affirm that cultural heritage, in all its forms, remains an indispensable resource for building a more equitable and sustainable future.

1.3 Cultural Sustainability from a Management Perspective

This research approaches cultural sustainability as a contested and evolving category shaped by both normative ideals and institutional practices. To interrogate how cultural sustainability is enacted at the interface of the global and the local, and how it becomes embedded in governance and strategic frameworks, the thesis draws on a set of interrelated theoretical and management perspectives. The central concern of this research is the application and management of cultural sustainability at the local level, particularly in urban heritage contexts where global frameworks, such as UNESCO's, interact with diverse local realities. This section situates the research within theoretical and management literatures that enable a critical interrogation of how culture is constructed, mobilized, and organised as a dimension of sustainable development.

Cultural sustainability has emerged as a central theme in both global heritage policy and local governance, particularly in response to the growing recognition that sustainable futures cannot be achieved solely through environmental or economic interventions. However, this emergence has not produced a singular or universally accepted definition. Drawing on world society theory (Meyer et al., 1997), this thesis treats 'culture' and 'sustainability' not as stable, objective categories but as socially constructed, symbolic scripts that gain legitimacy through global circulation and institutional endorsement. In this view, culture and sustainability are cultural artefacts of modernity – terms that derive their authority less from empirical clarity and more from their alignment with normative global models. International organizations like UNESCO function as carriers of these scripts, contributing to what Meyer et al. term institutional isomorphism: the tendency of nation-states and local

governments to adopt similar policies and structures in response to international standards, irrespective of local contexts. While such standardization may offer coherence and symbolic legitimacy, it often masks underlying diversity and conflict. Global models of sustainability tend to assume the universal applicability of concepts such as heritage preservation, resilience, or participation, without adequately accounting for local values, histories, or political conditions. The concept of cultural sustainability, in particular, risks becoming a floating signifier – adaptable enough to be used in various institutional settings, yet ambiguous enough to produce contradictory interpretations and unintended consequences when translated into practice.

To critically examine these translation processes, this research engages with Barbara Czarniawska's "travel of ideas" framework (1996), which theorizes how abstract concepts – such as cultural sustainability – move across time, space, and institutional settings. Rather than being mechanically adopted, ideas are named, framed, translated, and negotiated by local actors who reinterpret them in light of their own institutional logic, political agendas, and social realities. In this sense, ideas "travel" not in a linear fashion but through complex processes of translation and transformation.

This framework offers a powerful lens to examine the ways in which cultural sustainability is operationalized in Amsterdam and Venice, where globally endorsed principles (e.g., UNESCO's Operational Guidelines for the World Heritage Convention) come into contact with city-specific planning frameworks, stakeholder interests, and political constraints. The analysis shows that cultural sustainability is not implemented as a stable model but rather co-constructed in practice, with local actors selectively appropriating, reshaping, or resisting global sustainability scripts. This results in a landscape where cultural sustainability is simultaneously an instrument of institutional alignment and a site of local struggle, revealing the often-fragmented nature of sustainability governance and the need for a more nuanced, context-sensitive approach. By combining world society theory with the travel-of-ideas perspective, this thesis thus highlights the tensions between global discourse and local strategic practice, offering a framework to explore how cultural sustainability is framed,

institutionalized, and contested in different governance contexts. This interpretive lens supports the central aim of the research: to explore how pluralism in local understandings of cultural sustainability coexists with monism in global guidelines, and how tensions between the two are managed or contested. Naming refers to how cultural sustainability is invoked within local discourses – often to align with broader sustainability agendas – while translating denotes the iterative processes through which global ideas are rendered meaningful, actionable, and legitimate in context. These processes are inherently political and relational, often revealing the limits of global standardization and the strategic adaptations required to make such standards operational on the ground.

To further analyse how cultural sustainability is made sense of, justified, and mobilized within these contexts, the thesis draws on framing theory (Benford & Snow, 2000; Entman, 1993). Framing enables a dissection of the discursive construction of sustainability problems and solutions, distinguishing between diagnostic frames (identifying problems), prognostic frames (proposing solutions), and motivational frames (justifying action). These frames are rarely neutral; they reflect underlying power relations and determine which actors and interests are prioritized or excluded. The concept of framing is borrowed from Erving Goffman's Frame Analysis (Goffman, 1974), rooted in the symbolic interactionist and constructionist principle that meanings arise through interpretive processes mediated by culture (D. A. Snow et al., 2018). Framing is 'an active, process-derived phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction' (D. Snow & Benford, 1992: 136). The result of framing processes are frames, which are interpretative packages that, when created, enable individuals or organisations to make sense of experiences or transformations, and guide action (D. A. Snow et al., 1986; Werner & Cornelissen, 2014).

As a powerful perspective in sociology and social movement studies in particular, frame analysis treats frames not only as a unit of language but also as the very precursor to social action. In this sense, frame theorists share the notion that language does things with rhetoricians. Frame analysis seeks to evaluate the effect of frames on social outcomes (Green Jr & Li, 2011). Here framing is considered in its dual nature. On the one hand, framing is a process used by actors to influence

meaning structures and institutional processes (Entman, 1993). On the other, framing is a fluid, interactive sensemaking process (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014). Organisational scholars dissatisfied with the tendency in previous studies to 'focus more on the content of frames than on their use in social interactions' (Leibel et al.,2018: 165) have turned to an interactional perspective on framing (Gray et al., 2015; Reinecke & Ansari, 2021). Conceptualising framing as the 'dynamic enactment and shaping of meaning in ongoing interactions,' these scholars focus on 'how parties negotiate meaning in interactions' (Dewulf et al., 2009: 156). For the authors, interactional issue framing relates to 'how parties negotiate the meanings of issues in social interaction' (Dewulf et al., 2009: 170). The interest is in understanding how situations are defined by some actors and how this interpretation is accepted or challenged by others. Dewulf et al.'s (2009) concept of issue framing resonates with Benford and Show's (2000) idea of 'core framing task.' Core framing or issue framing entails three components. The first, termed the diagnostic component, delineates the core issue by highlighting a problematic scenario and assigning responsibility or blame to implicated agents (Benford & Snow, 2000; Entman, 1993). The second component, the prognostic aspect, involves articulating potential solutions, strategies, or tactics that can be employed to rectify the issue (Benford & Snow, 2000; Entman, 1993). The third facet is motivational, providing 'calls to arms' or compelling narratives to galvanise participation and rally adherents (Benford & Snow, 2000). Conflict may often arise when the actors involved interpret the issues in discordant ways, thus failing to create an acceptable joint framing (D. A. Snow et al., 2018).

Most research on collective action has focused on issue framing, specifically on how and why different issue framing may or may not be successful in triggering collective action (Green & Li, 2011). Within this stream of literature, there is a shared understanding of the role of language and rhetoric – i.e., 'naming and framing' (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014) – in moving the people 'from the balcony to the barricades' (D. A. Snow & Benford, 1988). A key concern in the literature regards why and how specific issue framing becomes successful in mobilising action (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow & Benford, 1988; Snow et al., 2019). Benford and Snow (2000), for instance, underline the

importance of frame alignment, which entails creating links between the issue frames of the proponents and the receiving actors. Recently, Werner and Cornelissen (2014) raised concerns over the risk of reification embedded in the concept of frame alignment. For the authors, this perspective risks reducing frames to static views created by heroic actors that may or may not persuade a passive audience. Such an approach fails to capture that persuasion is 'at least in part contingent on the framing of others and the broader discursive opportunities and constraints afforded by a particular institutional field' (Werner & Cornelissen, 2014: 1463).

With specific reference to grand challenges, the work of Ansari, Wijen and Gray (2013) embraced such an interactive approach to understand how actors framed and re-framed the issue of climate change over a period of time. Eventually, the emergence of consensus around the ecological imperative emerged from an interaction that led central figures to perceive their destinies as intertwined in relation to climate change, recognise their own actions as playing a role in the issue, and prompt them to engage in collaborative efforts to tackle the problem. Previous studies have also investigated the strategic leverage of ambiguity to instigate transformative processes concerning contentious issues (Ferraro et al., 2015; Gioia et al., 2012). It has been noted that ambiguity can foster the collective engagement of organisational actors without necessitating explicit consensus (van Wijk et al., 2013) while being beneficial for framing complex and contentious field issues (Ferraro et al., 2015; van Wijk et al., 2013). Previous studies unpacked the process of ambiguity in interactive framing (Gray et al., 2015), stressing the positive outcomes that ambiguity can lead to, for instance in the formulation of simple rules that can be applied in different contexts (Klag & Langley, 2023).

Another stream of literature looked instead at ambiguity as a potential harm. For instance, Gioia, Nag and Corley (2012: 3) argue that ambiguity must be contained 'within manageable bounds' and must be followed rapidly by clear measures guiding the implementation of any changes. Specifically, Feront and Bertels (2019) demonstrated that ambiguity may be beneficial for tackling such challenges when the proposed frame presents neither too much nor too little ambiguity, while it can hinder it if the proposed frame is too strict or loose. For example, framing cultural sustainability

in economic terms may align with growth-oriented urban agendas, while alternative frames may centre on cultural rights, identity, or intergenerational justice. These competing interpretations have material consequences for governance practices, investment decisions, and stakeholder engagement. Framing theory thus provides a powerful analytical tool to trace how meanings are constructed and contested within cultural sustainability discourse and how these meanings shape urban sustainability trajectories.

1.4 Research Question

As previously discussed, the role of culture in the context of sustainability has rarely been the subject of explicit and systematic discussion. Historically, the dominant frameworks for analysing and implementing sustainability have revolved around three primary pillars: ecological, social, and economic dimensions, as solidified by the Johannesburg Summit (UN, 2002). Within these frameworks, culture is occasionally mentioned or implicitly included under the social dimension; however, social and cultural aspects represent distinct facets of sustainability. Given that many, if not all, of the planet's environmental challenges – and especially its social and economic dilemmas – are deeply rooted in cultural practices encompassing human actions and behaviours (Soini & Birkeland, 2014), it logically follows that effective pathways and solutions must also be inherently cultural. Without a robust integration of cultural considerations, existing models of sustainable development – primarily shaped by economic and environmental concerns – are unlikely to achieve long-term success (Labadi, 2017).

The absence of explicit discourse on culture within sustainability debates has significant implications. Without deliberate recognition and argumentation for culture's importance, it risks being undervalued in decision-making processes. Culture, by its very nature, defies comprehensive or singular definitions. Even in the context of sustainability, it must be approached as a multidimensional concept, encompassing interconnected and non-mutually-exclusive interpretations. Consequently, efforts to integrate culture into sustainability frameworks are intertwined with broader

transformations in political, economic, and social relations under globalization, which also extend to the evolving role of science. Initiatives and practices emerging from diverse domains – including science, politics, and society – continue to shape the understanding and application of culture within sustainability, offering an open-ended framework for developing more sustainable futures for humanity.

Incorporating culture into sustainability discourse entails profound ontological and epistemological shifts in how sustainable development is conceptualized. These shifts have given rise to diverse narratives and expressions of culture (or cultures) in sustainability. While pluralism in understanding the role and significance of culture in sustainability is necessary and should be embraced, it must also be framed within a set of guiding principles. These principles (e.g. UNESCO's guidelines), as here argued, act as simple rules (Eisenhardt & Sull, 2001), providing a standard structure for the integration of culture and sustainability. Delving from these considerations, this thesis proceeds to investigate *how the concept of cultural sustainability is applied and managed at the local level in urban heritage sites.* This research interest allows for the evaluation of three key aspects here presented. First, it examines how pluralism can coexist with monism, specifically addressing how local interpretations of cultural sustainability align with UNESCO's guidelines, criteria, and standards. Second, it explores how the understanding of cultural sustainability evolves over time, shaped by contestations, actions, and changes. Finally, it considers how the integration of cultural sustainability influences policy-making at the local level.

2. Methodology

This doctoral research is grounded in an empirical interest in the examined cases. Employing an interpretative approach, the study focuses on the UNESCO urban heritage sites of Venice and Amsterdam. This choice aligns with the interpretive tradition (Weber, 1978), which seeks to understand complex phenomena in their specific contexts through sustained, detailed observation and inquiry (Cappellaro, 2017; Elías, 2023).

This research builds on extensive prior knowledge of UNESCO practices and the cultural sector. Accordingly, the concept of cultural sustainability did not emerge as a novel discovery within the context of this doctoral study but rather as an established and recurring concern encountered within both professional and academic domains. During my professional and academic journey, cultural sustainability has consistently emerged in professional discussions, academic debates, and sector-specific and public-oriented conferences, i.e. the celebrations for 50th anniversary of the UNESCO Convention (for further reading, please consult Ferrarini & Zan, 2023). Despite its widespread presence, the understanding of cultural sustainability remained fragmented and incomplete. Against this backdrop, this research did not begin with rigid theoretical frameworks but instead adopted an empirical, grounded approach to investigate how cultural sustainability manifests in practice. This approach aligns with the interpretative tradition, which emphasizes deriving insights from lived experiences and contextual realities (Ashworth et al., 2019; Elías, 2020). The selected case studies – Venice and Amsterdam – provided a basis for examining the challenges and opportunities inherent in applying cultural sustainability, with a consistent focus on their unique socio-political and organizational contexts.

The research began with the case of Venice, chosen as part of the Horizon 2020 project UNCHARTED during my tenure as a Research Fellow within the GIOCA Research Group,

University of Bologna.[1] From the very beginning, the case of Venice, as a UNESCO WH site at risk of being placed on the List of WH In Danger, provided fertile ground for investigating the interplay between cultural heritage and sustainability. From this case study, the theme of cultural sustainability prominently emerged, highlighting the inherent ambiguities and tensions within the concept. Subsequently, in a later stage of the research project, Amsterdam was selected as a comparative case study to broaden the scope of inquiry and assess whether the challenges of cultural sustainability were unique to Venice or indicative of broader patterns among cultural heritage sites.

Including a second case enabled a comparative analysis, offering the potential to extend findings beyond localized insights to a more generalized understanding while preserving the contextual richness essential to qualitative research. The focus on urban cultural heritage within the European geographical borders was guided by the necessity of ensuring consistency and comparability across cases. Within the temporal limitations inherent to qualitative research and the framework of a doctoral program, the study concentrated on two cases that were examined in depth (Yin, 2003). The two cases were compatible for comparison on the basis of their governance models and heritage challenges. On the first aspect, Amsterdam presents a decentralised model: heritage management takes place at the district level, while the overall guidelines and rules are established by the municipality and, in some cases, by the national state. The City of Venice, on the other side, is assimilated in the bugger metropolitan area including the mainland, where there are different challenges and needs in terms of heritage management; guidelines and rules are established mainly at the National level.

Regarding heritage challenges, both cases present a similar context: Venice and Amsterdam have UNESCO heritage sites that represent only one part of the overall urban area (the historical centre, or centre *storico* in Italian). The geographical aspect of these sites is also quite similar: old, historical city centres that struggle with over-tourism, gentrification, climate change and loss of

[1] Part of the findings of this case study are, at the moment of the thesis submission, employed for a research paper in collaboration with two members of the GIOCA Research Group, namely Prof. Paolo Ferri and Prof. Luca Zan. The paper is not published nor under review in academic journals.

resident population. One aspect that differentiates the two cases, and potentially the main reason why it is interesting to deal with these two cases in parallel, is that the city centre of Venice is physically separated by the rest of the urban area by water – the lagoon. In the case of Amsterdam, the Singelgracht is a physical barrier (a channel dividing the central district from the other district), but the continuity of the urban pattern is strongly maintained, as the channel is not as wide as to determine a drastic shift of the visual perception of the city. From an academic standpoint, the strategic selection of UNESCO WH sites as the unit of analysis aimed to investigate the interplay between global conceptualizations of cultural sustainability and their local implementations. While Venice was analysed first and Amsterdam in the second stage, the cases are presented in reverse order in this work to enhance the narrative's coherence and facilitate logical connections throughout the discussion.

The methodology section begins with an overview of UNESCO as an international meta-organizational agency, unpacking its structure and influence to set the stage for understanding the cases. This is followed by a discussion of the data collection methods and analytical strategies employed in the research. This methodological framework reflects an interpretivist commitment to understanding the nuanced, context-dependent nature of cultural sustainability through immersive, in-depth fieldwork. By embracing an ethnographic lens, this research seeks to contribute not only to theoretical debates but also to practical understandings of how cultural heritage is managed and sustained in diverse urban contexts.

2.1 Research Context: The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and Heritage Management

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization is one of the most prominent specialized agencies of the United Nations, established in 1945 with the mission to contribute to peace and security through fostering international cooperation in the fields of education, science, culture, and communication. Its overarching aim is to promote understanding, tolerance, and intercultural

dialogue, ultimately helping to build peaceful and inclusive societies. Over the decades, UNESCO has become a leading voice in global cultural and heritage preservation, education, and scientific research. Central to its mission is the preservation of cultural diversity and the protection of heritage, both tangible and intangible, in the face of global challenges.

The flagship initiative of UNESCO is the WH Program, which aims to protect and preserve cultural and natural sites of OUV for future generations. The program involves identifying, protecting, and promoting WH Sites, which range from ancient monuments to breathtaking natural landscapes. These sites are considered crucial not only for the country in which they are located but also for humanity as a whole. This program is operationalized in the WH List, created under the 1972 UNESCO WH Convention, which includes a diverse array of cultural and natural sites, all of which meet specific criteria for OUV (for further information about the history and organizational structure of UNESCO, please refer to History of UNESCO, n.d.). The designation of these sites is not merely a form of recognition but also a commitment to their preservation. By acknowledging the global significance of these locations, UNESCO helps protect sites against the risks of neglection, destruction, and over-exploitation, particularly through promoting sustainable practices.

Governance and Organizational Structure

UNESCO operates through a complex organizational structure that includes various bodies designed to oversee the implementation of its programs, policies, and activities (UNESCO, n.d.). As the supreme decision-making body, the General Conference comprises representatives from all Member States. Meeting every two years, it sets policies, approves the program and budget, and discusses important matters related to UNESCO's operations. Each Member State is granted one vote, ensuring an equal say in major decisions. Complementing this, the Executive Board oversees the implementation of the decisions made by the General Conference and provides strategic guidance to the Director-General. Comprised of 58 elected Member States, the Executive Board convenes twice

annually to monitor the organization's programs and approve specific projects, which is vital to the organization's smooth functioning.

In addition to these central bodies, UNESCO has several specialized intergovernmental committees and councils. These include the WH Committee, which is responsible for managing WH Sites and making decisions about their nominations under the 1972 WH Convention framework. Each Member State of UNESCO is also supported by a National Commission, which acts as a liaison between the government and UNESCO. National Commissions are instrumental in implementing the activities of UNESCO at the national level, promoting its objectives within their respective countries, and facilitating communication with civil society. UNESCO is supported by several advisory bodies. These include ICOMOS (the International Council on Monuments and Sites), which evaluates cultural heritage sites and provides expert conservation advice; ICCROM, the International Centre for the Study of Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, which focuses on the preservation of cultural heritage; and IUCN, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, which evaluates natural heritage sites and provides recommendations for their conservation. Ramsar, an international treaty focused on the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands, also contributes to the evaluation of natural heritage sites, particularly those related to wetland ecosystems.

Central to the WH Program is the WH Centre (WHC), established in 1992. The WHC coordinates the day-to-day operations of the WH Program, supporting the WH Committee's work and assisting countries with site nominations. Additionally, it facilitates technical assistance, capacity-building programs, and public awareness campaigns to ensure the preservation of cultural and natural heritage worldwide. The WHC plays a critical role in managing and protecting the WH Sites through its collaborative efforts with Member States and advisory bodies.

Heritage Management and Protection: The UNESCO World Heritage Convention

The 1972 UNESCO WH Convention is a seminal international agreement designed to identify, protect, and preserve sites of OUV. This Convention acknowledges both cultural and natural sites

deemed critical to global heritage, encompassing iconic landmarks, significant natural landscapes, and biodiversity hotspots. In order to be included on the WH List, a site must meet at least one of the ten selection criteria, which are divided into cultural (criteria i-vi) and natural (criteria vii-x) categories (UNESCO WH Centre, 1972). The nomination process for a site to be inscribed on the WH List begins at the national level. Each country prepares a "Tentative List" of potential sites within its borders and then submits a detailed nomination dossier to UNESCO. This dossier typically includes comprehensive information, such as descriptions, maps, and a justification for the site's OUV. Following submission, the nomination is evaluated by the WH Centre and its advisory bodies. These bodies conduct on-site inspections, expert reviews, and assessments of the site's authenticity, integrity, and management plan to ensure it meets the necessary criteria for inclusion.

The final decision on whether a site is inscribed on the WH List rests with the WH Committee. Once a site is inscribed on the list, it is subjected to ongoing monitoring and protection efforts. Countries are mandated to submit periodic reports on the conservation status of their WH Sites, ensuring that the international community remains informed about their preservation. Sites facing significant threats – such as those caused by armed conflict, natural disasters, or over-tourism – can be placed on the List of WH in Danger. This designation alerts the international community to the threats facing the site and often triggers additional support or intervention (Francioni, 2008). The WH Centre, in close collaboration with advisory bodies, oversees the monitoring of these sites and works with the relevant countries to ensure the implementation of appropriate conservation measures.

At the local level, the management of WH Sites is a responsibility of the State Party – the country that nominated the site – along with local authorities. The State Party ensures the protection of the site and the execution of its management plan, while local authorities, such as city councils, are tasked with enforcing policies and regulations that influence the site's conservation and development. The site manager, often a designated individual or organization, is responsible for the day-to-day management, overseeing conservation efforts, engaging with visitors, and developing sustainable tourism practices. NGOs play a crucial role in supporting the conservation of WH Sites

(Schmitt, 2009). These organizations often provide expertise, advocacy, and funding for preservation initiatives, and are instrumental in raising public awareness regarding the importance of heritage protection. While NGOs are not directly involved in the institutional relationships with UNESCO, they significantly contribute to both local and international heritage management efforts. Their involvement helps strengthen conservation strategies and facilitates collaboration between governmental bodies, heritage professionals, and local communities.

2.2 Data Collection

The data collection process for this doctoral thesis was carefully designed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the two empirical cases selected – Venice and its Lagoon and the Seventeenth-Century Canal Ring Area of Amsterdam inside the Singelgracht. The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining archival data, interviews, and secondary sources, in order to triangulate findings and provide a multi-dimensional analysis of the cases. This section discusses the methodologies for gathering data for each case, the rationale behind the selected strategies, and the challenges encountered throughout the data collection process.

For the Venice and its Lagoon case, the initial strategy was to engage directly with key figures within UNESCO and the local administration through semi-structured interviews. These interviews aimed to establish a dialogue with key stakeholders involved in the management and conservation of the site, which would serve to provide both historical and contemporary insights into the case. However, institutional resistance and the limitations imposed by various stakeholders hindered progress in this area, making it impossible to collect direct primary data through interviews as initially planned. This challenge led to a shift towards archival research, which became the cornerstone of the data collection process for this case. The main data source was the extensive online archives maintained by the UNESCO WH Centre for Venice and its Lagoon (WH Centre, 1987). These archives contain a wealth of official documentation pertaining to the site's history, management, and

conservation efforts, and they were made publicly available through UNESCO's website. Table 1 shows the sources used in the analysis.

These archival materials were produced between 1987 and 2021 and constitute the main body of the primary focal source (Khaire & Wadhwani, 2010). 2,213 pages of documents were collected, and 6.55 hours of recordings of WH Committee sessions were gathered. The official UNESCO documents allowed us to assess key events from 1987 to 2021, who the key actors were, and which framing they enacted. Contextual sources were used to validate and improve our understanding of focal archival data (for a similar approach, see Khaire & Wadhwani, 2010). Archival materials prior to the inscription of Venice in the WH List in 1987 were also collected. These sources, in particular, served us to trace the history behind the case study, starting from 1966 when the extraordinary flood of Venice led, among other events, to the creation of the UNESCO WH List.

Press articles and audio-visual sources were used to triangulate archival data. To complete the data triangulation, six key informants (from UNESCO and the municipality of Venice) were informally interviewed using the data collected and the snowball technique to identify other possible interviewees. Some of the informants asked to remain anonymous; accordingly, the paper refrains from systematically reporting the content of the interviews. Other relevant key actors in the case study were not authorised to disclose information on the topic (e.g. ICOMOS and WH Centre commissioners for the 2016 and 2020 Missions). Despite this, the interviews provided contextual information on the institutional and administrative dynamics, complementing our primary sources. The contextual sources count for a total of 1,032 pages of documents, more than 17,000 words of articles, and 31 pages of field notes.

Type	***n°***	***Length***	***Years***
Focal sources			
State of Conservation reports by the State Party	5	1.731 pages	2014 – 2020
State of Conservation reports by the World Heritage Centre	7	54 pages	1987 – 2021
Mission reports by ICOMOS, Ramsar, World Heritage Centre	2	179 pages	2016, 2021

Decisions of World Heritage Committee	14	56 pages	1987 – 2021
Recordings of World Heritage Committee sessions (transcript)	2	19 pages	2021, 2023
Italia Nostra dossiers to UNESCO	5	193 pages	2011, 2012, 2015, 2019
Contextual sources			
UNESCO (1969), Rapporto su Venezia, (348 pages)			
Wieser-Benedetti, G. (1970), Venezia una proposta, (documentary, 30')			
Press articles (33, in the period 1966-2923)			
Interviews with key informants from UNESCO and Venice Municipality (6 in total, 31 pages fieldnotes)			

Table 1 Focal sources and contextual sources retrieved, Venice case study

In contrast to the Venice case, the data collection process for the Seventeenth-Century Canal Ring Area of Amsterdam inside the Singelgracht (UNESCO WH Centre, 2011) was notably different regarding access to participants and the collaborative environment. The data collection for this case began in early 2023 when the researcher established contact with the site manager of the UNESCO site in Amsterdam. The cooperation and openness demonstrated by the World Heritage Bureau (herein after WHB) in Amsterdam enabled the researcher to conduct extensive semi-structured interviews with various key stakeholders, including staff members of the WBH, policymakers, heritage professionals, and representatives from NGOs involved in the conservation and management of the site. This collaboration with the WHB was particularly significant, as it facilitated interviews and the collection of valuable policy documents and archival materials that were essential for the analysis. The willingness of the WHB to engage in the research process created an environment of trust and openness, which allowed for the inclusion of a wide range of perspectives from both government and non-governmental actors.

2023 was a crucial year for the UNESCO site of Amsterdam, as it marked the second phase of monitoring by UNESCO. The WHB recognized this monitoring process as a key opportunity for fostering collaboration between various departments, as well as with academic researchers. The process also provided the researcher with an opportunity to observe firsthand the ongoing assessment and monitoring efforts that are part of the WH designation. This research study utilized semi-

structured interviews as the primary method of data collection, comprising both primary and secondary data. First, participants for semi-structured interviews were selected in collaboration with the WHB, leveraging their expertise and network within the heritage preservation domain. Initially, a purposive sampling approach was employed to identify policymakers with relevant knowledge and experience related to sustainability and conservation policies. Subsequently, the snowball sampling technique was utilized, whereby participants were asked to recommend other potential interviewees who could provide valuable insights into the research topic. This iterative process allowed for the inclusion of diverse perspectives and ensured the saturation of data.

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed based on the research objectives and preliminary literature review. The interview protocol consisted of a flexible set of open-ended questions designed to explore key themes and topics relevant to the research aims. Semi-structured interviews were conducted either in-person or virtually, based on participant preferences and logistical considerations. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accurate data capture. Field notes were also taken during the interviews to document non-verbal cues and contextual information. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, wherein no new insights or themes emerged from subsequent interviews. A total of 27 interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 50 minutes on average (refer to Table 2 for further details).

Organization	***Task***	***N.***	***Length***
Team at Monuments and Archaeology Department	Monuments consultants, Policy advisors	6	5’11’’
Puccini Method	Design advisors	4	3’23’’
Space & Sustainability, Team Sustainability: Green and Healthy City	Policy advisors	2	3’08’’
Delft University	Consultant	1	47’’
Committee for Spatial Quality	Director	1	1’02’’
Research & Statistics Department	Researcher	1	42’’
Sustainable Tourism - Economic Affairs and Culture Entrepreneurial Climate	Advisor	1	58’’

Stadsherstel Amsterdam	Adjunct director	1	56''
PBK Bridges and Quay Walls Program	Monument advisor	1	1'20''
Area Based Approach and Public Space Management	Desing advisor	1	1'
Beurs van Berlage	Director, Strategy advisor	2	1'30''
College of Mayor and Alderpersons	Monument and sustainability managers	2	1'15''
District City Centre	Program manager	1	58''
AMS Institute	Researcher	1	40''
Amsterdam World Heritage Office	Program managers	2	2'40''
Total		**27**	**25'05''**

Table 2 Overview of interviews type held, Amsterdam case study

The interviews constitute the primary body of data regarding the current state of the case study. Collaboration with the WHB enabled the collection of archival materials (e.g., the nomination dossier, the ICOMOS evaluation, and the management plan) related to the year 2010. Through the interviews, additional policy documents, regulations, and guidelines were gathered, providing valuable resources for triangulating the previously collected information. This process facilitated the collection of extensive data pertaining to 2010 and 2023, allowing for a longitudinal comparison of the case study's evolution over time. Secondary data sources were utilized to complement the primary data collected through semi-structured interviews. Documents relevant to the research topic were retrieved from various sources, including the UNESCO website, documents provided by interviewees, and archives maintained by the WHB. These documents included reports, policy documents, historical records, and archival materials, which provided additional context and background information. Table 3 depicts the documents retrieved.

Area	***Type***	***N.***	***Length (pp.)***
Social Sustainability	Amsterdam Policy Guidelines	1	10
Environmental Sustainability	Research Thesis	1	52
Cultural Sustainability	Site Management Plan	2	582
Environmental Sustainability	Amsterdam Policy Guidelines	1	21
Cultural Sustainability	Site Implementation Agenda	1	15

Cultural Sustainability	Amsterdam Policy Guidelines	1	115
Cultural Sustainability	UNESCO Report	3	31
Cultural Sustainability	Site Inscription	7	43
Cultural Sustainability	Site Nomination	1	1502
Total		**17**	**2371**

Table 3 Secondary data sources of archival nature, Amsterdam case study

Despite the robust data collection strategy employed, several challenges and limitations were encountered. In the case of Venice and its Lagoon, the institutional resistance faced in securing interviews with key stakeholders significantly hindered the ability to collect primary data through direct engagement with the actors involved in the site management. This limitation was mitigated by turning to archival sources, which provided extensive data on the history of the site and decision-making processes. For the Amsterdam case, while the cooperation with the WHB enabled extensive data collection, the researcher was still limited by the scope of available documents on the UNESCO. Despite these challenges, the data collection process for both cases resulted in a comprehensive and multi-faceted dataset that provided a detailed understanding of the sites' management, conservation practices, and institutional dynamics.

2.3 Data Analysis

The decision to adopt qualitative analysis for this research stems from its ability to capture the richness and complexity inherent in social phenomena. Qualitative methodologies, particularly those embedded in case study research, allow for a detailed and nuanced understanding of contextualized processes (Yin, 2003), stakeholder perspectives (Elías, 2020), and temporal dynamics (Langley, 1999). Through qualitative approaches, researchers can explore not only what happens but also why and how it unfolds, which is critical for investigating multifaceted phenomena like institutional change, governance, and the interplay of multiple actors over time.

The Amsterdam case was qualitatively analysed through a systematic thematic approach. The qualitative methodology adopted in this study aligns with the principles of case study research

(Eisenhardt, 1989a; Yin, 2003). Beginning with the transcription of interviews, the analysis ensured the comprehensive capture of participants' insights. This initial step aligns with the framework proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006), emphasizing immersion in the data as the foundation for rigorous thematic analysis. The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. In the first stage, all interview transcripts and notes were thoroughly reviewed to identify detailed themes that emerged, such as specific ways in which confidence in research was ensured. In the second stage, these detailed themes were grouped into broader intermediate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, the intermediate themes were connected to overarching themes and compared with existing literature to identify areas where the interviews aligned with previous research and where new, in-depth, or controversial insights emerged. These preliminary findings were shared with colleagues, including during seminars and conferences, to gather feedback.

During this process, data from the two distinct phases under consideration – the initial inscription in 2010 and the current status following the second monitoring cycle in 2023 – were analysed in parallel to identify overarching themes. Subsequently, the data were examined separately to assess whether and to what extent the foundational elements evolved autonomously across the different temporal stages under analysis. Four months after the initial analysis, the interviews were reviewed again to identify alternative themes, new interpretations of the data, and any missed nuances that may have been overlooked in the first stage. This was done to reduce the risk of simply confirming initial ideas, actively seeking diverging perspectives and disconfirming evidence. In the first stage, the focus was on identifying common themes, simplifying the data, and reaching a degree of saturation to converge on a main structure. In contrast, the second stage aimed to add depth to the analysis, uncover additional nuances, and contrast different perspectives (Richardson, 2000; Tracy, 2010). This process allowed for a more comprehensive representation of the interviewees' voices, enriching the main structure identified earlier.

This approach enabled the identification of continuities and discontinuities over time in the key elements, thus facilitating the recognition of the contributions emerging from the research

(Langley, 1999). Moreover, the re-analysis of interviews four months after the initial phase exemplifies a reflective and rigorous approach. This step, akin to a crystallization process (Richardson, 2000; Tracy, 2010), ensured the identification of alternative interpretations, overlooked nuances, and disconfirming evidence. The research transcended mere data saturation by actively seeking divergent perspectives to achieve a more layered and nuanced understanding. The Amsterdam case thus highlights how thematic analysis, supported by iterative revisiting of data, enriches the representation of participants' voices while enabling a robust structure for theoretical insights. Table 4 depicts the thematic analysis employed.

Year	Overarching Theme	Intermediate Theme	Emerging Theme	Original Exemplification Quote
2010	Governance Structures	Naming	Robustness of Decentralized System	*"All the management measures form an effective and coherent system, within the responsibility of the Central Borough of Amsterdam and with the guarantee of the Bureau of Monuments."* – Inscription Document (2010) *"The management system is established, it operates well, and everyone knows what is expected of them. The Management Plan is a serious and credible compilation of a coherent ensemble of measures and responsibilities."* – Inscription Document (2010) *"All the management measures form an effective and coherent system [..] A horizontal management and monitoring body for the property has now been implemented, the Amsterdam World Heritage Bureau."* – Inscription Document (2010)
		Translating	Decentralization and Need for Coordination	*"You could see the difference between quarters—one side of a road had yellow lamp posts, and five meters later, they were red. It was disjointed and needed centralization."* - Head Designer
		Translating	Decentralization and Need for Coordination	*"The Plan lays down the way in which the City of Amsterdam together with the siteholder, the Central Borough, will provide the information and communication on preserving and protecting the site [..] in accordance with UNESCO's Operational Guidelines[..] setting up an Amsterdam World Heritage Bureau and designating a municipal contact point for dealing with issues surrounding this World Heritage Site."* – Inscription Document (2010)
				"Every big decision, like more than 5 million, was decided centrally, but smaller projects were decided in districts, which created discrepancies in public space design." – Public Space Designer
	Regulatory Frameworks	Naming	Regulatory Legitimacy and Validation	*"At the Municipal level some fifty byelaws and regulatory texts are applicable to the preservation of the property. They cover the definition of local policies for the overall preservation, conservation and management of the historic city, and the definition of the organisations in charge of implementing these policies"* – Inscription Document (2010) *"The situation with regard to protection seems to be complex, within the context of the operation of the Amsterdam Central Borough (the heart of the city), but the procedures that govern protection are complied with."* – ICOMOS Evaluation (2010) *"A very large number of buildings and structures are protected by national and municipal heritage listing."* – Inscription Document (2010)
		Translating	Need for Law Harmonization	*"The emphasis in 2010 was on harmonizing local and global regulations to protect heritage while allowing the city to function effectively."* - Landscape Architect

				"We needed to align Amsterdam's frameworks with UNESCO's principles, ensuring global heritage standards were met while maintaining the city's operational frameworks." - Head Designer *"The integration of UNESCO's global criteria into local frameworks required substantial adjustments to ensure both compliance and functionality for the city."* - Head Designer
2023	Governance Structures	Naming	Delegating Heritage Protection to Professional Evaluations	*"How can you decide if you can build a window [in an innovative and energy-sustainable way]? Someone must study the house project and evaluate the case."* - Head Designer *"The shift to expertise-driven heritage assessment ensures decisions are well-informed [..] also thinking about the specific context."* - Head Designer *"Professionals evaluate the practicality of preservation projects, balancing heritage needs with sustainability and climate adaptation."* - Landscape Architect *"The introduction of standardized evaluation methods means decisions about heritage are less political and more technically sound [..] but also it depends on the single case."* - Landscape Architect
	Regulatory Frameworks	Translating	Standardization Process and Reduction of Complexity	*"The Puccini method's green and red standards ensure that local practices align with municipal and heritage needs, reducing the complexity of regulations."*-Landscape Architect *"Standards developed at the city level give officers clear guidelines to follow, simplifying decision-making without compromising preservation values."* - Designer *"The Puccini method has been a significant step in standardizing practices across the city, from materials used to how public spaces are maintained."* - Landscape Architect *"Standards like the green Puccini are living tools; they evolve as new information about sustainability and climate change emerges."* - Landscape Architect *"We're continuously updating our standards to meet the changing needs of the city, such as climate adaptation and sustainable urban planning."* - Head Designer

Table 4 Structure of the thematic analysis

For the Venice case, an inductive case study methodology (Eisenhardt, 1989a), following a phenomenon-driven approach (Eisenhardt, 1989a; Eisenhardt et al., 2016; Pfeffer, 2007). This phenomenon-driven approach prioritized the unfolding of events and their underlying mechanisms, making it particularly suited for understanding the dynamic interplay between institutional actors and grand challenges. Data analysis started as the fieldwork began. We first collected and organised the archival data, then read the documents taking notes and summarising the contents. We used information from archival materials and field notes to construct the timeline of events concerning the inscription, evolution, and controversy on the UNESCO site V&L, building an event history database (Van de Ven & Poole, 2002). Table 5 lists key events.

Year	***Event***
1966	Venice flooded with unprecedented high water. International attention and mobilisation to restore and preserve Venice

1972	World Heritage Convention ratification, creation of the WH List and of the List of WH In Danger
1987	Venice and its Lagoon inscribed in UNESCO World Heritage List during the World Heritage Committee in Paris
1988	International donation for the preservation of Venice
1989	Venice nomination for Expo 2000 is discussed with concern at the WH Committee
1990	Venice withdrew from hosting Expo 2000
2011	First dossier from the civil society denouncing UNESCO the poor state of conservation of Venice
2012	UNESCO requests clarification from Italy on the ongoing projects in Venice and updates on its state of conservation
2013	UNESCO requested a State of Conservation to the State Party with further information
2014	At the 38th session, the WH Committee issues a Reactive Monitoring Mission of UNESCO Advisory Bodies to Venice and its Lagoon
2015	A new Major, Luigi Brugnaro, is elected in Venice Municipality
	From 13 to 18 October 2015: joint ICOMOS/ Ramsar/ WH Centre Reactive Monitoring mission to the property
2016	In the 40th WH Committee session, after the publication of the 2015 Mission Report, the inscription of V&L in the List of World Heritage in Danger is considered.
2017	Venice City Council publishes the 'Reply Report', responding to Decision 40COM 7B.52 of the World Heritage Committee
	The In Danger List is still considered at the 41st session of the WH Committee
	Luigi Brugnaro, Venice Major, meets the Director General of UNESCO in Paris
2018	Venice City Council provides supplementary details on the ongoing development projects
2019	At the 43rd session, the WH Committee requires clarification on the property boundaries, the In Danger List is still considered
	Civil society reply to the State of Conservation produced in 2018 by the State Party
2020	Venice City Council invites a joint ICOMOS/ Ramsar/ WH Centre Advisory Mission to the property from 27 to 31 January 2020
	Venice City Council submits further details on ongoing projects to the WH Centre
2021	The 2020 Mission Report is published. The WH Centre proposes the inscription of the site in the List of World Heritage In Danger.
	20th July: Italian Government bans Big Ships from passing by the historical city centre of Venice (St. Mark Basin and Giudecca Canal).
	22nd July: In the 44th session of the WH Committee, ICOMOS proposes in Draft Decision 44 to inscribe the site in the List of WH In Danger. The Ethiopian Delegate proposes an amendment of the Decision in which the site is no longer inscribed in the List of WH In Danger. The WH Committee votes in favour of the amended Decision 44.
2022	Venice City Council publishes a report, as required by Decision 44.
2023	In July, ICOMOS officially proposed in the Draft Decision 45 to inscribe Venice and its Lagoon in the List of World Heritage In Danger.
	12th Sep: Venice City Council introduces a new system for managing tourist flows mainly based on paying a ticket for entering the historical city centre.
	14th Sep: At the 45th WH Committee, the Delegate of Japan proposed the amendment of Decision 45, deleting the paragraph where V&L was inscribed in the List of WH In Danger. The WH Committee votes in favour of the amended Decision 45.

Table 5 Event history database, Venice case study

Then, temporal bracketing was used to identify distinct yet connected phases (Langley, 1999) that helped untangle the multiplicity of events in the history of the site, identify turning points, and map the actors at play. Such temporal structuring is essential in qualitative research to maintain internal consistency while highlighting discontinuities that signify transformation. Internal consistency and continuity within each temporal phase were maintained, identifying discontinuities as indicators for differentiation from the preceding phase. The analysis covered an extensive time span, including antecedents (1966 – 2011), and then focused on different phases during the 'In Danger' controversy (2011 – ongoing), which are different in terms of the institutional actors involved in the interaction.

In the second analysis stage, we used frame analysis (Goffman, 1974) to understand how actors deploy frames to make sense of the context and shape the outcomes (Creed, Langstraat & Scully, 2002). In doing so, we iterated between data and theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and started to look for insights regarding the framing of a grand challenge informed by the literature. Within an interactional perspective on framing processes (Dewulf et al., 2009; Ansari et al., 2013), we looked at the variance between specific points of episodes in conflict interaction. Following research on interactional framing, we identified issue framings and process framings. Issue frames focus on the significance attributed to agenda items, events, or problems within the pertinent domain or context (Felstiner, Abel & Sarat, 1980; Putnam & Holmer, 1992). Process frames, conversely, pertain to the interpretations that disputants ascribe to the procedural aspects of their interaction (Putnam & Holmer, 1992; Stokes & Hewitt, 1976). To assure validity, we searched for patterns by comparing across temporal phases to look for differences between the framing processes in place, and to understand why changes in the frames occurred. The analytical process further strengthened the phases previously identified, allowing the emergence of elements of change and continuity in time. Table 6 offers an overview of the framing analysis employed.

Actor	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3

Advisory Bodies – Process Framing	*Given the large number of projects that are planned or on-going in and around the lagoon (including new off-shore platform, new terminals, tourist port and large leisure facilities), the cumulative impacts on the OUV of the property needs to be comprehensively assessed. The results need to be submitted in English or French to the World Heritage Centre for review by the Advisory Bodies."* – State of Conservation Report (2014) Need for more information and UNESCO intervention based on experts' assessment	*"The Mission considered that the property is faced with both proven and potential threats, which could have deleterious effects on its inherent characteristics and recommends that the state of conservation of the property be examined by the World Heritage Committee with a view to considering the inscription of the property on the List of World Heritage in Danger."* – Mission Report (2016) Experts consider the In Danger List, ask UNESCO monitoring	*"The continued deteriorating effects of human intervention, [and] climate change on the Lagoon ecosystem, threaten to result in irreversible change. The resolution to these long-standing problems is hindered by a lack of overall vision and low efficiency of [stakeholder] management. These factors warrant the inscription of the property on the List of World Heritage in Danger."* – State of Conservation Report (2021) Experts advice to include Venice in the In Danger List, need of UNESCO action
Advisory Bodies – Issue Framing	*"Expresses its concern about the extent and scale of proposals for large infrastructure, navigation and construction projects in the Lagoon that can potentially jeopardize the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the property by generating irreversible transformations on the landscape and seascape of the property."* *"Given the large number of projects that are planned or ongoing in and around the lagoon (including new off-shore platform, new terminals, tourist port and large leisure facilities), the cumulative impacts on the OUV of the property needs to be comprehensively assessed."* – State of Conservation Report (2014) Venice issues are complex and interconnected, Venice is a universal issue	*"The Mission recommends that the State Party is invited to implement appropriate measures, including those in conformity with the Special Law for Venice, in order to prevent deterioration of architectural and urban planning coherence."* *"If appropriate approaches are developed, [it] could be a chance for a clearer decision making process that today is extremely complex and an obstacle for connected measures. [..] Conservation activities, undertaken to-day by many different bodies and poorly linked and coordinated, could importantly benefit if the decision-making [..] would follow a clear way and if the responsible persons of the new body would be aware of the long-term-importance preserving the City of Venice and its lagoon."* – Mission Report (2016) Many issues are not managed locally and this threaten the OUV, this is a global concern	*[T]he velocity of progress for longstanding problems is too slow and too limited, with key issues being neglected. Despite some progress, threats, and their impacts on attributes of OUV continue to accumulate, which is a great cause for concern and a threat to the property."* *"The lack of a shared Vision and Strategy [is] one of the greatest threats to its OUV, in terms of how lack of action is allowing threats to attributes to accumulate across the property"* – Mission Report (2020) Venice is In Danger as issues got worse, its universal value is damaged
WH Committee – Process Framing	*"[The WH Committee] requests furthermore the State Party to invite a joint UNESCO/ICOMOS reactive monitoring mission to the property in 2015 to assess current conditions at the property, including the evaluation of potential impacts derived from development proposals and identify options for development proposals in accordance to the OUV of the property, as well as to review if the property is faced with threats which could have deleterious effects on its inherent characteristics and meets the criteria for its inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger in line with Paragraph 179 of the Operational Guidelines , and recommends to the State Party to also invite a representative of the Secretariat of the Ramsar Convention to take part in this reactive monitoring mission."* – Decision 38 COM 7B.27 (2014) Bringing civil society concerns to UN discussion based on experts' assessment	*"Notes that progress has been made towards the implementation of some of the 2015 Reactive Monitoring mission recommendations endorsed by the Committee and reiterates its request that the State Party continue to implement all the recommendations put forward in the Decision 40 COM 7B.52, including immediate, short, medium and long-term measures."* *"Requests furthermore the State Party to submit to the World Heritage Committee a detailed report on the state of conservation of the property [..] for examination by the World Heritage Committee [..] with a view to considering, if adequate progress in the implementation of the above recommendations has not been made, the inscription of the property on the List of the World Heritage in Danger."* – Decision 41 COM 7B.48 (2017) Enacting standard protocol of monitoring and reviewing the site	*"Welcomes the updated information provided by the State Party with reference to the measures adopted to ban ships over 25.000 gross tons, from 1 August, from the San Marco Basin, San Marco and Giudecca channels, and acknowledges the measures approved for a temporary mooring of the large ships and for a long-term solution to the maritime traffic, prioritizing the option outside the Lagoon altogether and redirecting them to other, more suitable ports in the region as a final solution."*- Decision 44 COM 7B.50 (2021) Accepting over-simplified solution and voting mechanism

Venice City Council – Process Framing	Data not available	*My presence today is a sign of Venice's confidence and commitment to international cooperation. [..] I hope this meeting will be the starting point for a collaboration that builds a new vision for Venice for the next 20 years."* – Brugnaro (2017) *"The report testifies the commitment of all the entities involved in this common effort to keep the protection of Venice and its lagoon at the centre of the national and international agenda, giving a response to the requests defined by the World Heritage Committee."* – State of Conservation Report by the State Part (2018) Compiling UNESCO procedural requests leveraging UNESCO Office and diplomatic means	*"[A] letter was sent to UNESCO by the delegation of Italy on 20 July 2 days ago concerning [Venice], [..] which has been widely spread already through the media. This information concerns a decree being approved by the Italian Government on 13th. The decree prohibits from first August 2021 the transit of ships of more than 25,000 tons from the San Marco Basin, the San Marco and Giudecca Canal. [..] For the moment, details on how this decree will be implemented and how the large ships over 25,000 tons will be allowed to enter the lagoon waters and where will they more is not yet known."* – WH Committee Session (2021) Leveraging voting mechanism and last-minute commitment to avoid the In Danger List
Venice City Council – Issue Framing	Data not available	*"The State Party does not fully recognise this vision of generalised degradation."* *"The aggregate of all this scientific evidences shows significant improvements in the quality of the air, water, and soil compared to the levels measured in 1987, and the site of Venice and its Lagoon can be seen to present better environmental characteristics than other parks. Over time, the institutions have worked to rebuild sandbanks, renovate historical buildings, and restore the city's ancient foundations."* – State of Conservation Report by the State Party (2017) Minimizing Venice's issues as they are not 'that' serious	*"[T]he Municipality of Venice and the relevant authorities have demonstrated that they have implemented the commitments set out in the previous SoC Reports, as detailed in this document. In fact, it should be noted that crucial issues have been positively addressed and resolved for some time (Large ships) [..] while intense work is still being done on others."* – State of Conservation Report by the State Party (2021) Over-simplify the complexity of *Venice's issue to one (Big Ships)*

Table 6 Supporting data for the frame analysis through discrete phases and actors

As demonstrated in Amsterdam and Venice, qualitative analysis offers a powerful lens for understanding complex, context-dependent phenomena. Its strength lies in its flexibility, which allows researchers to adapt to the nuances of their data while maintaining methodological rigor. The ability to delve into participants' perspectives, explore temporal dimensions, and incorporate multiple levels of analysis makes qualitative research particularly suited for addressing grand challenges and institutional dynamics (Pettigrew, 1990). Moreover, qualitative methods like thematic analysis and frame analysis provide a structured yet open-ended approach to uncovering hidden patterns and generating new theoretical insights. For instance, in Amsterdam, the thematic synthesis of participant perspectives revealed not only shared understandings but also areas of divergence, enriching the

conceptualization of confidence and contribution. Similarly, in Venice, the integration of temporal bracketing and framing perspectives illuminated how institutional actors navigated conflict and adaptation over decades, contributing to the understanding of long-term governance challenges.

The choice of qualitative analysis for this research reflects a commitment to capturing the richness and complexity of the phenomena under study. Whether through the thematic synthesis of participant insights in Amsterdam or the inductive exploration of institutional dynamics in Venice, qualitative methods have proven indispensable for generating in-depth understanding and actionable insights.

3. The struggle of balancing global criteria and local inputs: managing cultural sustainability in the city of Amsterdam

3.1 Introduction

This chapter delves into the question of how local administrations valuate and evaluate World Heritage. Specifically, the focus of this work revolves around the processes for which local governments are held responsible for developing and implementing sustainability policies of urban WH sites (Buehrig, 1976; Wiktor-Mach, 2020). In the case of urban sites, the area designated for WH status typically coincides with the territory subject to the routine administration of the respective city (Labadi, 2013). Therefore, the entity responsible for managing urban WH sites is given to "the municipality" (Buehrig, 1976; Foster, 2015; UNESCO, n.d.), i.e. the local government entity which usually governs the city jurisdiction (Cole & Boyne, 1995). This terminology, while seemingly straightforward, belies the intricate dynamics at play, creating inherent tensions between the imperatives of UNESCO site preservation and the broader municipal policies for city development (Hoggart, 2011; Nielsen, 2011).

This chapter focuses on the case study of Amsterdam, selected alongside Venice to explore the similarities and differences between the two contexts. Amsterdam, designated as a UNESCO WH urban site in 2010, is characterized by its interconnection between water and the architectural fabric, creating a dynamic urban landscape that faces significant challenges related to cultural sustainability. These challenges include issues of conservation and preservation, the impacts of climate change, overtourism, and managing a stable resident population within the WH site.

At the same time, Amsterdam offers a contrasting perspective due to its distinct administrative context, marked by a history of New Public Management (herein after NPM) practices and decentralization. Unlike other sites with more centralized or UNESCO-focused governance, Amsterdam has a markedly different relationship with UNESCO, involving minimal direct

interaction since its inscription. Additionally, the city's heritage trajectory is shaped by its recent designation as a WH site in 2010, providing a point of comparison with cities with longer-standing designations and relationships with UNESCO. This case was selected to explore how the concept of cultural sustainability travels from global frameworks, such as those established by UNESCO, to local governments. Specifically, it examines how local governments interpret, operationalize, and address cultural sustainability in diverse ways, influenced by their administrative structures, historical contexts, and engagement with global heritage governance. Amsterdam's unique position offers valuable insights into the complexities of adapting UNESCO's global discourses to local realities.

The Amsterdam Canal District is a relatively recent addition to the UNESCO WH List, having been inscribed in 2010 (UNESCO WH Committee, 2010). Its recognition as a WH site marked a milestone for Amsterdam, acknowledging the city's exceptional achievements in urban planning, hydraulic engineering, and cultural innovation during the 17th century. This designation highlights the Canal District as a cultural site of global significance, embodying the integration of natural and built environments in a way that continues to influence urban design worldwide. The site is notable not only for its historical and architectural significance but also for its sheer scale (198.2 ha) and the extensive buffer zone (481.7 ha) surrounding it (UNESCO WH Centre, 2011). The size and scope of this zone underscore Amsterdam's commitment to preserving the integrity and authenticity of the site. This approach aligns closely with UNESCO's emphasis on safeguarding cultural heritage within a broader urban context, ensuring that the core site is protected from external pressures while maintaining its relevance as a living urban environment.

The inscription of the Amsterdam Canal District was based on its alignment with three UNESCO cultural criteria (UNESCO WH Centre, 2011). First, it was recognized as a masterpiece of human creative genius, showcasing unparalleled achievements in hydraulic engineering and urban planning (Criterion i). Second, the site reflects significant exchanges of human values, particularly in trade, intellectual culture, and architectural innovation, during the Dutch Golden Age, a period of profound cultural transformation in Europe (Criterion ii). Lastly, it represents an outstanding example

of a planned urban ensemble, influencing the development of port cities and urban designs globally (Criterion iv).

The management framework established for the Amsterdam Canal District is as unique as the site itself. Unlike other European WH sites, where centralized management structures are more common, Amsterdam employs a decentralized and highly collaborative model. To support the site's governance, the Amsterdam World Heritage Bureau was established as an independent entity in 2009. Interdisciplinary collaboration is a hallmark of the Amsterdam model. Rather than confining responsibilities to a single agency, the city leverages the expertise of professionals embedded in different departments. These individuals often fulfil multiple roles and collaborate in teams to address complex challenges. This governance structure reflects a broader tradition of consensus-building and innovative problem-solving that is deeply rooted in Dutch culture. It also allows for a more dynamic response to the evolving needs of the site, balancing heritage preservation with the demands of a living, modern city.

This chapter focuses on two distinct moments in the history of the Amsterdam Canal District WH site: the time of its inscription in 2010 and, more than a decade later, in 2023. This comparative analysis reveals how the perception and practice of cultural sustainability have evolved over this period. At the time of its inscription, the city prioritised establishing a robust framework to meet the requirements of UNESCO for integrity, authenticity, and management system. The emphasis was on conservation, regulatory compliance, and fostering a sense of shared responsibility among stakeholders. Creating the WHB was a key step in this process, providing a dedicated entity to oversee the site management and facilitate collaboration between departments.

Over the past decade, the focus has shifted toward embedding cultural sustainability more deeply into the city's governance processes. This shift reflects a growing awareness of the interconnectedness between cultural heritage and broader sustainability goals, encompassing environmental, social, and economic dimensions. The chapter explores how Amsterdam has translated principles of the UN agency into local policies and practices, addressing challenges such

as urban development, mass tourism, and the impacts of climate change. It examines the mechanisms enacted by the local government to align heritage management with the city's broader sustainability agenda, including policy adaptations, innovative governance strategies, and efforts to engage local communities in the stewardship of the site.

A key question driving this chapter is: *How have local government processes and mechanisms evolved over a decade to align with UNESCO principles of cultural sustainability, and what changes are observed from the time of initial inscription to ten years later*? To answer this question, the chapter investigates several critical aspects of site management, including policy development, interdisciplinary collaboration, community involvement, and the metrics used to assess sustainability. It considers how these elements have evolved in response to shifting priorities and external pressures, offering insights into the dynamic relationship between heritage preservation and urban governance. The experience of the Amsterdam Canal District provides a valuable case study for understanding the challenges and opportunities of WH site management in a contemporary urban setting. The governance framework developed by Amsterdam demonstrates how decentralized, collaborative approaches can enhance the effectiveness of heritage management while fostering cultural sustainability. By reflecting on the evolution of policies and practices over the past decade, this chapter contributes to broader discussions about the role of WH sites in promoting sustainable development and cultural resilience in the 21st century.

3.2 Research Context

The historic urban ensemble of the Amsterdam Canal District was constructed at the end of the 16th and beginning of the 17th centuries as a new port city. It involved draining swampland, creating a network of canals in concentric arcs, and filling in intermediate spaces to extend the city. This resulted in a large and homogeneous urban area featuring gabled houses and monuments. This extension was the largest and most uniform of its time, serving as a model for large-scale town planning worldwide until the 19th century. The Amsterdam Canal District is recognized for its OUV due to its exemplary

hydraulic and urban planning, which created a large-scale port city in the 17th century. It showcases unique bourgeois architecture and reflects the city's enrichment through maritime trade and humanist culture. This district served as a model for urban planning worldwide. Numerous buildings and structures are protected by national and municipal heritage listings. Management measures are implemented by the Central Borough of Amsterdam and the Municipal Bureau for Monuments and Archaeology (BMA). Efforts are made to control urban growth and preserve the district's visual integrity, including managing advertising and tall building impacts. A horizontal management and monitoring body, the Amsterdam WHB, has been established to oversee the property.

The management of the nominated property, the Amsterdam Canal District, is overseen by several key entities. The City of Amsterdam, particularly the Central Borough, manages general administration, public regulations, building permits, town planning, safety, public thoroughfares, and maintenance of streets, embankments, bridges, public planting, landscaped areas, and lighting. The BMA and the External Appearance and Historic Buildings Committee (CWM) are responsible for conservation efforts. The Amstel, Gooi, and Vecht Water Authority handle hydraulic management, including regulating water levels in canals and rivers, monitoring aquifer and water quality, and wastewater treatment.

The UNESCO site undergoes adherence to various policies. The primary document, known as the Management Plan for the Amsterdam Canal District, is an exhaustive manuscript crafted by the BMA with the objective of coordinating operational strategies and sectoral initiatives. This plan encompasses regulatory frameworks, programmatic outlines, and a comprehensive delineation of property management, with a particular emphasis on the facets of protection, conservation, and future prospects. There are also national policies dictating the recognition of heritage, delineating monuments of national significance. Additionally, municipal policies are in place, consolidated under the umbrella of the so-called Puccini Method, a guideline policy document that governs the planning and maintenance of public spaces.

3.3 The struggle of naming, translating and making sense of cultural sustainability

The inscription (2010) of Amsterdam on the UNESCO World Heritage List

In 2010, Amsterdam Canal District was inscribed as a UNESCO WH site. The inscription document depicts the district as a unique example of large-scale city planning that harmoniously addressed environmental challenges while fostering cultural and architectural advancement. The inscription process emphasized specific aspects of the district's OUV. These included the historic concentric canal layout, the preservation of its 17th- and 18th-century houses, and the site's representation of Dutch *genius* in managing water systems. These elements reflect the district's capacity to sustain its cultural and historical significance. Following the understanding of cultural sustainability that emerged from the previous chapter, according to UNESCO, the cultural sustainability of the site is maintained through two core principles: authenticity and integrity.

These principles are pivotal to understanding and preserving the OUV of the site and are, therefore, critical to the site's management and future protection. Authenticity refers to the degree to which a property truthfully conveys its cultural values. For assessing the OUV of the Amsterdam Canal District, authenticity is seen to be rooted in its ability to preserve the original attributes that define its cultural and historical identity. Central to this, according to the inscription document (WH Centre, 2010), is the retention of the district's urban design, particularly its concentric canal network, radial waterways, and historic embankments. These features have remained largely unchanged since their creation in the 17th century, offering a credible representation of Amsterdam's historical urban layout. Many of the houses built remain in place and in good condition, retaining their original facades and structural integrity. This continuity in the built environment ensures that the site remains a tangible link to the past. Additionally, the district has maintained its historical functions, serving as an urban space for residential, commercial, and cultural activities. This ongoing use preserves the spirit of the area and reinforces its role as a living cultural landscape. By preserving these attributes,

it is believed that the Amsterdam Canal District continues to truthfully express its historical and cultural values, satisfying the requirements for authenticity.

On the other hand, integrity is postulated as the criteria that assesses the wholeness and intactness of a heritage site, evaluating whether it sufficiently retains the physical and cultural attributes necessary to convey its OUV (UNESCO WH Committee, 2021b). In the case of Amsterdam, integrity is demonstrated by preserving its canal network, radial streets, embankments, and bridges, all of which remain in their original configurations. These features together form a cohesive urban landscape that reflects the city's historical development and planning strategies. The visual coherence of the district was key in fulfilling the criteria of integrity. Regulations had been implemented to prevent urban developments that might disrupt the area's historical character, such as the construction of tall buildings or the proliferation of large-scale advertising (WH Centre, 2010). This commitment to preserving the site's visual and spatial harmony ensured, in 2010, that the district remains a genuine representation of its historical period. The nomination dossier underscored the importance of maintaining the district's defining features, emphasizing their role in preserving the site's integrity. By retaining the core attributes of its urban design and physical structures, the Amsterdam Canal District exemplified the values that justify its inscription as a WH site.

In the eye of UNESCO, the preservation of authenticity and integrity, and therefore the cultural sustainability of the WH site, has to be achieved through a combination of effective public management and a robust regulatory framework (UNESCO WH Committee, 2021b). In the next sections, I delve into these twofold aspects of cultural sustainability. Table 7 depicts the key challenges affecting the property.

Aspect at Risk	**Risk to the Property**	**Underlying Governance and Regulatory Process**
Visual Integrity	Advertising, high-rise construction, and façade aesthetics directly affect the visual harmony of the property.	*"The State Party also reports that a new policy on façade advertising was introduced on 27 November 2008 and, by 1 January 2011, grants amounting to a total of 217,989 EUR have been given by the district council to assist entrepreneurs and owners in dealing with undesirable façade advertising and ensuring compliance with the rules."* - State of Conservation Report (2010) *"The State Party reports that the publication "High-rise construction in Amsterdam" was scheduled for adoption by the*

		Amsterdam Council on 16 February 2011 as a section of the (draft) Structural Concept 2040. In addition, the State Party reports that in January 2010 the Municipal Executive decided to add a special guideline on high-rises, as a separate policy document, to the new (draft) Structural Concept 2040 for Amsterdam where a High-Rise Impact Report is now compulsory for building initiatives above 30 metres in height." - State of Conservation Report (2010)
Conservation and Urban Development	Ensuring that conservation objectives are not compromised by urban or commercial developments.	*"[T]he suggestion to create a charter of good conduct between the city and the commercial sector, defining what is allowed and what is not with regard to the treatment of buildings, is already addressed by the Amsterdam Central Borough through existing regulations, land use plans, and policy documents for buildings, including the General Municipal Ordinance and the Manual on the Development and Redevelopment of the Public Space, as well as through local consultations and meetings with a wide range of interested parties."* - State of Conservation Report (2010)
Stakeholder Engagement	Balancing the diversity of stakeholder and international heritage obligations.	*"In terms of the expertise required for the property's management, it would be difficult to quote any precise or reliable figures because of the diversity of stakeholders. However, the skills are clearly available in sufficient numbers and available for employment on specific financially consolidated projects. They are generally of an excellent scientific and professional level. They easily adopt international standards for conservation, and are indeed often involved in defining those standards."* - State of Conservation Report (2010)
Regulatory Framework	Simplify the complex set of regulations at play without occurring in deregulation.	*"The body of protection regulations is the culmination of a long-standing, evolutionary process [..]. This has resulted in a complex regulatory structure, frequently updated, under the overarching control of the Municipality of Amsterdam. Recent trends in terms of regulations seem to focus on moving towards a simplification of these regulations and reinforcing the Municipality's executive powers, notably on the City's Central Borough."* - State of Conservation Report (2010)
Governance Structure	Institutional complexity of the administrative, financial, and technical parties involved	*"[T]he proposed Management Plan is very thorough and that it is immediately operational. [T]he State Party details the long-standing operations within the Municipal authorities, and the Central Borough in particular. The World Heritage Bureau was established on 1 September 2009 in the Central Borough and is tasked with broadly coordinating the application of the management plan and monitoring the property."* - State of Conservation Report (2010)

Table 7 Supporting data on the governance and regulatory processes at play in Amsterdam

Decentralized Governance and Cultural Sustainability: Managing World Heritage within a Complex Administrative Framework

Amsterdam's governance system is characterized by significant decentralization, reflecting both historical developments and the influence of broader governance trends in the Netherlands. In the 1990s, NPM principles further shaped Amsterdam's administration. The spatial administration of the city is, to date, organized into eight decentralized districts, known as "*stadsdelen*" or city parts, originally based on water management systems and later formalized as administrative entities. Each

borough is governed by a directly elected district committee ("*bestuurscommissie*"). Established in 1981 and expanded over time, the borough system culminated in Amsterdam-Centrum achieving borough status in 2002. A 2010 restructuring consolidated these divisions into eight administrative units. Until 2014, these boroughs, referred to as submunicipalities ("*deelgemeenten*"), enjoyed significant autonomy under the principle of 'submunicipalities decide, unless.' They were managed by elected district councils ("*deelraad*") and separate executive boards appointed by the council. However, central municipal authorities retained control over key areas such as public order, budgeting, public transport, and social security, ensuring oversight while allowing for localized governance.

From the documents retrieved, in 2010 the management of the newly inscribed WH property was deemed to public authorities. The municipal administration was divided into numerous departments (36), each with distinct competencies and organizational structures designed to manage specific aspects of urban life (for a more detailed overview, please refer to Table 8). Multiple entities carried out the management of the Canal District, each responsible for specific aspects of the conservation of the site. This remains quite unvaried till today, with the City of Amsterdam, particularly the Central Borough, overseeing urban planning, building permits, and the maintenance of public spaces such as streets, embankments, and bridges. The Amsterdam BMA and the External Appearance and Historic Buildings Committee (CWM) focus on the conservation and restoration of historical buildings. Meanwhile, the Amstel, Gooi, and Vecht Water Authority manages hydraulic systems, regulating water levels, aquifer quality, and wastewater treatment. These departments operate under the central municipal council's supervision but maintain a degree of operational independence. A Committee for Spatial Quality, deemed to oversee and approve public intervention, was already in place. This Committee had no management responsibilities, as it is an independent board of professionals in the conservation and urban planning sector in charge of approving or rejecting projects dealing with historical buildings and heritage areas.

	Nominated property	Buffer zone
Population	23,708 residents	45,691 residents
Surface area	205 ha	479 ha
Geographical borders	Singelgracht	Amsterdam Municipality area
Legal protection	– Legal protection: The site and its historic monuments have been protected since the early 20th century, with numerous acts and regulations strengthening this protection. – National regulations: Key laws include the Cultural Heritage Act (1984), Monuments Act (1988, revised in 2006), Housing Act, Urban Regeneration Act (2000), and various spatial planning laws. Certification of restoration architects and Water Boards Act are also relevant. – Municipal regulations: About 50 byelaws govern local preservation, conservation, and management. Key byelaws include the Municipal Building Regulations, Amsterdam Monuments Byelaw, and water and port regulations. – Urban Conservation Area: The Central Borough is protected by the Monuments Act of 1988. The property includes 3,466 buildings protected nationally and 433 municipally. The buffer zone holds 3,188 national monuments and 697 municipal buildings.	
Management Bodies	– Central Borough of Amsterdam: Oversees general administration, building permits, town planning, public safety, and public infrastructure maintenance, including streets, embankments, bridges, and lighting. – Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science: Operates through the National Service for Archaeology, Cultural Landscape, and Built Heritage (RACM), focusing on cultural and historical preservation. – Municipal Bureau for Monuments and Archaeology (BMA): Responsible for conservation of historical sites and monuments. – External Appearance and Historic Buildings Committee (CWM): Assists with conservation efforts. – Amstel, Gooi, and Vecht Water Authority: Manages hydraulic infrastructure, including dykes, locks, canal water levels, aquifer monitoring, and wastewater treatment, while also overseeing the visual quality of water since 2006. – World Heritage Bureau (established 2009): Coordinates the implementation of the Management Plan and monitors the property's conservation and management.	

Table 8 Overview of the legal protection and management bodies in Amsterdam

In response to the challenges of managing Amsterdam's historic urban fabric, the Amsterdam World Heritage Bureau was established in 2009 (WH Centre, 2010). This initiative aimed to streamline the management of the UNESCO WH-listed areas, addressing the need for a centralized entity to oversee conservation efforts and compliance with international standards.

Its primary responsibilities included:

- Acting as a liaison between the Municipality of Amsterdam and UNESCO, ensuring adherence to the requirements of the WH Convention.
- Facilitating communication and collaboration among various city departments, particularly those dealing with urban planning, monuments, and archaeology.
- Providing administrative and technical support for heritage conservation initiatives.
- Developing and implementing management plans to balance urban development with the preservation of historical values.

The establishment of the WHB marked an attempt to reduce the administrative fragmentation inherent in the decentralized governance model, centralizing heritage management under a single, specialized entity. However, its effectiveness was limited by constraints such as a lack of dedicated funding, a small workforce, and minimal influence over local political decision-making.

The governance structure of the urban heritage in the city of Amsterdam was seen to guarantee that specialized knowledge was applied to specific policy areas, although the risk of fragmentation of public actions was noted (ICOMOS, 2010). In 2010, as reflected in the inscription document, the public administration of Amsterdam demonstrated its commitment to naming and translating the UNESCO concept of cultural sustainability within the newly designated WH site. Naming can be defined as the process of identifying, defining, or framing a concept in a way that gives it meaning and recognition. In this context, to secure inclusion on the UNESCO WH List, Amsterdam's administration undertook efforts to identify why and how the city's heritage, under UNESCO protection, could be recognized as culturally sustainable. This process can be understood as moving from local to global – seeking to identify, within Amsterdam's governance framework, the elements required by the international body. Specifically, UNESCO's demands for a robust governance structure were addressed through this alignment. The primary aim here was to demonstrate that the cultural sustainability of the site is ensured through a stable and appropriate management framework.

The second process, translating, can be defined as the process of taking a concept – in this case, cultural sustainability – as defined at a global or theoretical level (such as by UNESCO) and applying or adapting it to a specific, practical context, such as Amsterdam's governance and heritage management. Translating involves operationalizing abstract principles into concrete actions, policies, and institutional frameworks that function effectively within the local context. For Amsterdam's Municipality, translating cultural sustainability entailed embedding UNESCO's broad ideals of heritage preservation and sustainable development into the city's policies and practices. This included establishing institutional structures, such as the WHB, fostering coordination among municipal departments, and ensuring the alignment of local governance with global sustainability objectives. In

essence, this process represents the movement from global to local, transforming high-level conceptual frameworks into practical, actionable measures that address the unique needs and challenges of Amsterdam's urban and cultural environment.

Harmonizing the Heritage Regulatory Framework: Balancing Global Standards and Local Governance

In 2010, the regulatory framework for heritage preservation in Amsterdam was highly structured but also in need of harmonization. Over decades, a complex system of regulations and oversight had been developed to protect the city's historic fabric, culminating in the recognition of Amsterdam's Canal District as a UNESCO WH site. However, despite the extensive framework in place, the system was judged as fragmented (ICOMOS, 2010), requiring an overhaul to streamline procedures and ensure better coordination across various levels of governance.

Amsterdam's regulatory framework for heritage preservation has evolved over several decades. The city's monumental buildings were first legally protected in the early 20th century, and by 1988, the Dutch Monuments and Historic Buildings Act came into effect, providing a national framework for the protection of significant structures. This law was complemented by other national policies, such as the Cultural Heritage Act and the Monuments Act, which were designed to regulate the conservation of individual buildings and historic areas. At the municipal level, additional regulations and policies were enacted to further safeguard Amsterdam's built environment. The Amsterdam Monuments Byelaw (2005) and the Additional Heritage Byelaw (2009) were particularly important in regulating building permits, restorations, and alterations to historic buildings. Furthermore, there were municipal policies that governed broader aspects of city management, such as the Puccini Method, a policy document that set guidelines for public space planning and maintenance. These regulations formed a comprehensive framework for heritage preservation but, over time, had become increasingly complicated and difficult to manage due to their sheer number and complexity.

The WH Centre recognized the complexity of Amsterdam's regulatory framework, acknowledging the need for harmonization without undermining the protection of the site's cultural value. It emphasized that the regulatory structure should not be simplified to the point of deregulation to avoid reducing the level of protection for Amsterdam's heritage. At the same time, there was a need to simplify the regulatory system to make it more manageable and effective. In 2010, efforts were underway to harmonize the regulatory framework. The goal was to reduce administrative burdens and enhance the overall efficiency of the protection mechanisms in place, especially as Amsterdam's status as a UNESCO WH site necessitated rigorous conservation rules. The Municipality of Amsterdam, particularly through the Central Borough, sought to consolidate control and ensure that the governance of heritage was clear, transparent, and effective. This process of harmonization was framed within the broader goal of cultural sustainability, ensuring that the site's value would be preserved and aligned with global standards set by UNESCO.

On the regulatory framework, the efforts of naming and translating were in play. The process of naming involved the validation of the existing local legal processes and resources that are used to identify and protect Amsterdam's heritage. In this context, the city's public administration needed to demonstrate that the regulatory system in place was both appropriate and effective in ensuring the protection of the OUV of the site. This process sought to align the local regulatory system with the requirements set by UNESCO for heritage protection. In parallel, there was an ongoing process of translating, which focused on understanding and identifying how the protection and preservation of heritage could be operationalized within the context of Amsterdam. The translating process aimed to bring UNESCO's global principles down to the local level, working to assimilate UNESCO's directives within the Amsterdam context. This effort translated into attempts to harmonize and make the various levels of regulation more coherent, both vertically (across different levels of protection) and horizontally (among the various types of heritage identified).

In other words, while naming focused on legitimizing and validating the existing regulatory framework to meet UNESCO's standards, translating sought to operationalize these standards in the

local context, ensuring that protection and preservation efforts were aligned with both global principles and local needs. The goal was to create a regulatory structure that was not only consistent across different types of heritage but also effective at all levels of governance, from national laws to municipal policies and district-level regulations. This process of harmonization was key to ensuring that Amsterdam's heritage would be protected in a manner that was both sustainable and in line with the expectations of UNESCO's WH Convention.

Bridging Local and Global

The mechanism of naming and translating helps understand cultural sustainability at the local level. These processes are not linear but cyclical and dynamic, moving back and forth between local and global elements. In this process of local-global back-and-forth, it becomes possible to conceptualize what cultural sustainability means for Amsterdam. In 2010, being 'culturally sustainable' implied adhering to a set of global standards and assimilating UNESCO's criteria. In 2010, cultural sustainability in Amsterdam was thus defined by a twofold challenge: assimilating global criteria and responding to UNESCO's requests while also ensuring that Amsterdam's existing framework of governance and regulatory systems could fit UNESCO's global principles. The local government faced the significant challenge of making these global standards operational in a city that had a long history of complex, decentralized governance and a fragmented regulatory framework.

The management and regulatory setting in Amsterdam were key to ensuring the cultural sustainability of the site. As the city sought to balance local administrative structures with global cultural preservation standards, one critical issue was how to address the decentralized governance system and the scattered regulatory framework. Amsterdam's administrative structure was fragmented across several districts, each with its own responsibilities, often leading to inconsistent application of policies and regulations. Additionally, the regulatory landscape for heritage protection was complex, with multiple layers of legislation at the national, regional, municipal, and district levels. The city's challenge was to harmonize these different regulations and governance structures in a way that could ensure the site's protection while maintaining local autonomy. Table 9 provides a

comprehensive summary of the key processes occurring within the realms of governance structures and regulatory frameworks.

	Processes at play	Processes sensemaking
Governance	*Decentralization* Naming: Identifying locally the criteria of appropriate management framework Translating: Embedding UNESCO's criteria into the city's policies and practices i.e. establishing the WHB	Twofold dynamic: Assimilating global criteria and responding to UNESCO's requests while ensuring the fit of Amsterdam's existing frameworks in UNESCO's global principles
Regulatory Framework	*Harmonisation* Naming: Legitimizing and validating the existing regulatory framework to meet UNESCO's standards Translating: Operationalizing standards in the local context, ensuring alignment with global principles	

Table 9 Naming and translating in governance and regulatory framework, 2010

By 2023, the issue of managing cultural sustainability had evolved, and a UNESCO monitoring cycle took place to assess the progress of Amsterdam's efforts. This monitoring process was crucial in understanding how well the city had been able to integrate UNESCO's directives into its regulatory and governance systems. It provided an opportunity to reflect on the successes and challenges faced in ensuring the protection of the WH site and to assess the continued relevance and effectiveness of the regulatory framework that had been put in place. In the next section, I investigate how the process at play in the sensemaking of cultural sustainability evolved in the city of Amsterdam.

UNESCO Monitoring in 2023 and Beginning of the Research (2023–2024)

The research process began in 2023 as part of the ongoing UNESCO monitoring of the Amsterdam WH site. The objective of the next section is to assess how the evaluation processes at play in the Municipality of Amsterdam evolved after more than ten years of existence of the Amsterdam WH site. The research approach implied a qualitative study of Amsterdam's heritage management processes. Key stakeholders, including policymakers, architects, urban planners, engineers,

conservationists, and representatives from the Municipality's departments responsible for heritage management, participated in interviews. Emerging themes included the struggle to harmonize heritage conservation with sustainability requirements, the influence of citizen-driven initiatives, and the necessity for flexibility in applying standardization protocols such as the Puccini Method. In the next section, the thesis delves into the processes at play.

Governance, Professional Evaluation, and Cultural Sustainability in Heritage Management

In 2023, Amsterdam's heritage management remains characterized by its decentralized governance structure, where responsibilities are delegated to individual professionals within various municipal departments. Despite the creation of a centralized Bureau for the management of the UNESCO site, the actual management of heritage relies heavily on professional evaluation. This framework emphasizes the critical role of experts from interdisciplinary fields, including architecture, conservation, urban planning, and art history, in making nuanced decisions about the identification and preservation of heritage assets. In recent years, changes within the municipal departments have aimed to strengthen the capacity of the WHB, which was initially under-resourced. Starting with a single staff member, the bureau has expanded modestly to 2.5 full-time positions. This change reflects the acknowledgement of the increasing complexity of managing WH designation, particularly given the city's decentralized governance and the interplay between local and international expectations.

However, insights from interviews with policymakers, heritage professionals, and municipal staff reveal that the WHB remains marginalized within the larger public administration. While most stakeholders are aware of the UNESCO designation and its implications, there is limited understanding of the Bureau's specific roles and responsibilities. This lack of awareness underscores a broader challenge in heritage governance: the fragmented and independent manner in which departments manage their responsibilities. Each department operates as part of interdisciplinary teams that handle aspects of urban and heritage management, often without significant involvement or coordination with the WHB. Consequently, the success of heritage governance relies heavily on the expertise and decision-making of individual professionals rather than a unified or centralized strategy.

A key finding from the research is, indeed, the growing importance of officers who serve as mediators between the policy framework and its implementation. These officers play a dual role, not only ensuring compliance with laws and regulations but also acting as consultants for conservation projects. A significant theme that emerged from the interviews is how the concept of cultural sustainability is addressed within the local context. Amsterdam's approach highlights the need to reconcile bottom-up requests from civil society with the overarching framework set by UNESCO. For instance, residents' demands for practical measures like enhanced window maintenance or planting more trees in urban areas often clash with the rigid conservation standards expected in a UNESCO-designated site. The naming process is enacted here as the identification of local needs within the context of the cultural sustainability of the WH site. This is an ongoing effort, as the city seeks to balance the preservation of heritage with evolving social, environmental, and functional priorities in a local-to-global effort to bridge the city's need with UNESCO criteria.

The process of aligning local concerns with global conservation frameworks reveals both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, Amsterdam's decentralized governance allows for flexibility and responsiveness to citizen initiatives. On the other hand, this system introduces the risk of overlapping powers and inefficiencies in coordination among departments and professionals. The attempt to centralize governance through the creation of the WHB has only partially succeeded, as responsibilities remain fragmented and highly granular. Each department operates autonomously, with civil servants acting as intermediaries between the law and the public while also providing technical advice for conservation initiatives. This granularization of governance is particularly evident in the widespread reliance on civil servants to mediate and consult on heritage-related issues. While this system has the advantage of fostering a close relationship between policymakers and citizens, it also creates significant demands for coordination and communication. The decentralized approach, coupled with the partial failure of efforts to centralize through the WHB, highlights the complexities of heritage governance in a UNESCO urban site.

Despite these challenges, the findings reveal that Amsterdam's heritage governance framework successfully fosters cultural sustainability. The decentralized model, though imperfect, allows for a degree of flexibility that is essential in adapting to the dynamic needs of the city and its residents. The existence of the WHB, even in a marginal role, represents a step toward integrating global conservation priorities with local governance. Furthermore, the emphasis on professional evaluation ensures that decisions are informed by expert knowledge and interdisciplinary collaboration, contributing to effectively managing the city's heritage assets.

In conclusion, while the attempt to centralize heritage governance through establishing the WHB has not fully resolved issues of fragmentation and coordination, Amsterdam's approach to cultural sustainability is robust. The city's reliance on professional evaluation, coupled with its decentralized governance structure, allows for a nuanced and adaptable approach to heritage management. By addressing the tensions between local needs and global standards, Amsterdam continues to navigate the complexities of preserving its cultural heritage while fostering sustainability and inclusivity in its urban landscape.

Standardization and Cultural Sustainability: The Evolution of Amsterdam's Regulatory Framework

The approach to heritage management in Amsterdam has undergone a significant transformation, marked by a shift from fragmented laws to a harmonized policy framework. This regulatory evolution has aimed to standardize practices, reduce complexity, and foster cultural sustainability in line with both local priorities and global expectations. Over the years, the city has implemented several policies to unify the diverse layers of its regulatory system. These efforts culminated in the streamlining of heritage management procedures, which now aim to provide consistency across the city's urban landscape while maintaining flexibility to address specific local needs.

The city faced the challenge of ensuring greater consistency in its urban pattern, leading to the implementation of standardized policy instruments like the Puccini Method. Introduced initially during the NPM reform as a tool to standardize public space design and maintenance, the Puccini Method has been substantially implemented in the past ten years to provide clear guidelines for public

servants in their tasks of conserving urban aesthetics and cultural sustainability. Standardization has become a cornerstone in reconciling heritage obligations with evolving urban dynamics by reducing regulatory complexity without compromising preservation standards or de-regulation heritage conservation. Standardization plays a dual role in the city's heritage management framework. It facilitates spatial planning and supports Amsterdam's compliance with UNESCO criteria for WH sites while also serving as a mechanism to translate cultural sustainability into operational policies. This translation process is here rooted in local contexts, ensuring that global frameworks, such as UNESCO's, are adapted to Amsterdam's unique heritage and socio-cultural dynamics. Through policy-making, the city has crafted standards that bridge the gap between local and global priorities, ensuring that heritage protection aligns with community needs while adhering to international guidelines.

In 2023, a key element in the governance setting and regulatory framework is delegating heritage assessment and protection to professional evaluations. Expertise from interdisciplinary fields – ranging from architectural history to urban planning – plays a pivotal role in determining how heritage preservation is implemented. These professionals, equipped with the city's standardized policies, navigate the intricate process of assessing heritage value and determining the best approaches for its conservation. This reliance on expert evaluations underscores Amsterdam's commitment to balancing regulatory consistency with the nuanced demands of its heritage landscape.

Integrating Local Adaptation and Global Standards in Heritage Governance and Regulation

Through the years, Amsterdam's approach to heritage governance and regulatory framework has evolved significantly through a process of unification and harmonization. This transformation has relied heavily on the establishment of standards and the delegation of heritage assessment and protection to professional evaluations. By consolidating the governance structure and aligning it with a streamlined regulatory framework, the city has sought to address the complexities of preserving its cultural heritage while navigating the demands of urban development.

The processes of naming and translating are central to this dual framework, each addressing distinct yet interconnected dimensions of heritage management. Naming, within the governance context, involves the identification and assessment of heritage assets, determining their significance and articulating the criteria for their preservation. On the other hand, translating, as embedded in the regulatory framework, refers to the operationalization of these heritage goals through the standardization of public spaces. Policies developed under this framework ensure that the principles of heritage protection are effectively implemented in the city's spatial planning and urban management.

Despite their distinct dynamics, naming and translating are deeply intertwined. The development of standards in policymaking by municipal officers informs their actions on the ground, while the practical outcomes of these policies shape future regulatory adjustments. This reciprocal relationship ensures a dynamic governance process that integrates diverse perspectives from residents, businesses, and district-level stakeholders. Such integration ensures that heritage management remains responsive to local needs while adhering to the overarching standards required by UNESCO and other global frameworks. A significant feature of Amsterdam's current strategy is its shift in focus from a top-down application of UNESCO criteria to a more localized approach to cultural sustainability. The city's emphasis now lies in adapting to the specific inputs of its communities rather than imposing external logics onto its heritage sites.

This approach facilitates a continuous dialogue between local priorities and global regulations, creating a governance and regulatory ecosystem that balances tradition with innovation. Hereafter, Table 10 presents a detailed overview of the primary processes operating within governance structures and regulatory frameworks.

	Processes at play	**Processes sensemaking**
Governance	*Professional Evaluation* Naming: Delegating heritage assessment and protection to professional evaluations, who determine how heritage preservation is implemented	Intertwined dynamic: Developing standards at the city level informs officers' decision-making, while local needs shape future regulatory adjustments

Regulatory Framework	*Standardization* Translating: Implementing local standards in municipal policies reducing regulatory complexity without compromising preservation requirements

Table 10 Naming and translating in governance and regulatory framework, 2023

3.4 Evolving Local Government Processes in Amsterdam's Heritage Management

This chapter has explored the mechanisms and processes that have transformed heritage governance in the city, focusing on the alignment of local practices with UNESCO's principles of cultural sustainability. From the site's initial inscription in 2010 to the present day, Amsterdam has demonstrated a dynamic interplay between global frameworks and local adaptations. Key findings highlight a shift from decentralized governance structures to professional evaluations, from fragmented legal harmonization to standardized policy frameworks, and an overarching transition from adhering strictly to global criteria to prioritizing local needs.

The Shift from Decentralized Governance to Professional Evaluation: Investing in Public Officers

One of the most notable changes over the past decade has been the transition from decentralized governance to a model emphasizing professional evaluation. Historically, Amsterdam's governance system relied heavily on its decentralized structure, with boroughs managing their own regulatory responsibilities. While this model provided flexibility and responsiveness to local needs, it also resulted in fragmentation and inconsistencies in applying heritage management practices. The establishment of the WHB in 2010 marked the first step toward addressing these challenges. However, the bureau's limited resources and marginal position within the broader municipal framework initially hindered its effectiveness. Over time, the city invested in public officers with specialized expertise, empowering them to act as mediators between policy frameworks and practical implementation. These officers—professionals from interdisciplinary fields such as architecture,

conservation, and urban planning—became central to heritage evaluation and decision-making processes.

This shift underscores the increasing reliance on expert knowledge in heritage governance. Rather than depending solely on bureaucratic structures, Amsterdam's model now prioritizes the nuanced judgments of professionals who can navigate the complexities of cultural sustainability. Public officers play dual roles as advisors for conservation projects and mediators who reconcile local citizen demands with regulatory standards. This professionalization has helped streamline governance, ensuring that heritage management aligns with both global standards and Amsterdam's unique urban and cultural fabric.

The Shift from Law Harmonization to Policy Standardization

Another critical evolution has been the move from law harmonization to policy standardization. At the time of the site's inscription, Amsterdam's legal framework for heritage protection was characterized by layers of national, municipal, and district-level regulations. While these laws provided comprehensive coverage, their complexity often created administrative inefficiencies and ambiguity in decision-making. Recognizing the need for a more cohesive approach, the city shifted its focus to developing standardized policies to guide heritage management more effectively. The Puccini Method, for example, became a cornerstone of this strategy. By standardizing the aesthetic and functional aspects of public spaces, the method provided clear guidelines for urban planning while maintaining the flexibility to address site-specific needs. Importantly, this approach avoided deregulation, ensuring the robust protections required for a UNESCO site remained intact.

Policy standardization also facilitated better coordination among municipal departments and stakeholders. It served as a translation mechanism, operationalizing UNESCO's principles in a manner tailored to Amsterdam's context. By simplifying regulatory processes while preserving their integrity, the city achieved a balance between consistency in urban planning and the adaptability required to address evolving challenges.

Adapting UNESCO Logic to Local Context

The ability of local administration to adapt UNESCO logic to its local context has been pivotal in addressing the challenges of cultural sustainability. Rather than imposing global frameworks rigidly onto the city's governance structures, Amsterdam has developed a model that integrates these frameworks with local priorities. This approach reflects a pragmatic understanding of cultural sustainability, which emphasizes the importance of aligning heritage preservation with the lived realities of communities.

At the heart of this adaptation is the concept of naming and translating. Naming involves identifying and categorizing heritage assets in ways that resonate with local values, while translating entails operationalizing UNESCO's abstract principles into actionable policies. These processes are deeply interconnected, creating a dynamic feedback loop between global standards and local practices. For instance, policies like the Puccini Method and the Bestemmings Plan demonstrate how Amsterdam has reinterpreted UNESCO criteria to reflect the city's socio-cultural and environmental contexts. This adaptive approach has also allowed Amsterdam to address the inherent tensions between conservation and modernization. As the city strives to meet ambitious sustainability goals—such as reducing reliance on natural gas and promoting energy-efficient buildings—it has had to reconcile these objectives with preserving its historic fabric. By fostering dialogue among stakeholders and leveraging professional evaluations, Amsterdam has found innovative solutions that balance these competing priorities.

From Adapting to Global Criteria to Adapting to Local Inputs

A significant shift observed over the past decade is Amsterdam's movement from adapting to global criteria to prioritizing local inputs. At the time of the site's inscription, the focus was largely on meeting UNESCO's requirements for authenticity, integrity, and management. While these criteria remain essential, the city's approach has evolved to emphasize integrating community needs and local stakeholder perspectives. This shift reflects a broader understanding of cultural sustainability as a

dynamic and context-dependent process. By engaging residents, businesses, and community organizations in heritage management, Amsterdam has created a more inclusive governance model that recognizes the value of local knowledge and participation. Initiatives like the planting of trees or adjustments to building maintenance policies illustrate how local inputs shape the city's approach to heritage conservation. Moreover, this emphasis on local adaptation has strengthened the site's resilience to external pressures, such as overtourism and climate change. By aligning heritage management with broader sustainability goals, Amsterdam has positioned itself as a model for integrating cultural preservation into the fabric of a living, modern city. The city's ability to navigate the local-global interplay underscores the importance of flexibility and inclusivity in heritage governance.

3.5 A Dynamic Model for Cultural Sustainability

Over the past decade, Amsterdam's governance and regulatory frameworks for its UNESCO WH site have profoundly transformed. The city has moved from a fragmented, decentralized system to a model prioritising professional evaluation, policy standardization, and local adaptation. This evolution reflects a nuanced understanding of cultural sustainability, which balances the demands of global frameworks with the realities of local contexts. The findings of this chapter highlight the importance of adaptability in heritage management. By investing in professional expertise, streamlining regulatory processes, and fostering community engagement, Amsterdam has developed a governance model that is both resilient and responsive. While challenges remain—particularly in achieving greater coordination among stakeholders—the city's approach offers valuable insights for other urban WH sites navigating similar complexities.

The experience of the Amsterdam WH site demonstrates that cultural sustainability is not a static goal but an ongoing process of negotiation and adaptation. By prioritizing local inputs and embedding global principles within its unique urban context, the city has charted a path that aligns heritage preservation with the needs of a dynamic, modern metropolis. This discussion addresses the

central research question: How have local government processes and mechanisms evolved over a decade to align with UNESCO principles of cultural sustainability? The findings from the case study provide two primary insights into this evolution. Firstly, the decoupling of the processes of naming and translating—both within governance structures and the regulatory framework—has facilitated greater flexibility in the management of cultural heritage (please refer to Table 11 for a synthetic summary).

	Processes at play	**Processes sensemaking**
2010	Governance Decentralization Law Harmonisation	Cultural sustainability means adapting to global criteria
2023	Professional Evaluation Standardization	Cultural sustainability means adapting to local inputs

Table 11 Synthetic overview of the processes at play: 2010, 2023

This decoupling has proven instrumental in enabling a differentiated evolution of these two critical dimensions. In terms of governance, the early constraints imposed by the Dutch administrative context to satisfy UNESCO's criteria, alongside the attempts to harmonize legislative frameworks, were largely aimed at showcasing the robustness and accountability of Amsterdam's WH status. However, these efforts, primarily oriented toward fulfilling international requirements, did not necessarily translate into effective or efficient protection of cultural heritage. This shortfall points to a key misalignment between the procedural objectives of WH designation and its ultimate purpose: ensuring the enduring preservation and sustainability of cultural assets.

The year 2023 marked a pivotal transition with the implementation of a naming process driven by the professional evaluations of individual public officers. This shift enabled the application of UNESCO's protection standards in a manner that was more effective, albeit characterized by a degree of operational looseness and variability. Compared to the earlier establishment of a centralized entity – which struggled for years to embed itself within Amsterdam's already intricate administrative and governance ecosystem – this approach proved significantly more responsive and adaptable. Amsterdam's administrative structure, encompassing numerous departments and overlapping

jurisdictions, benefitted from a decentralized yet professionalized model allowing more nuanced and context-specific heritage management. Simultaneously, the translating process evolved to adopt an intermediate solution that mediated between local legislation and UNESCO guidelines. This intermediate approach, epitomized by the development of standards, created a bridge between local and international priorities without succumbing to deregulation or disregarding UNESCO's directives. Implementing these standards provided a mechanism for operationalizing cultural sustainability in a way that preserved flexibility while maintaining alignment with the overarching goals of the WH framework.

The second insight pertains to the transformation and deepening of the concept of cultural sustainability itself. At the time of Amsterdam's inscription on the WH List in 2010, initial efforts to name and translate UNESCO's concept of cultural sustainability were undertaken in a literal and uncritical manner. During this phase, the primary objective was to align Amsterdam's local context with the international criteria set by UNESCO, attempting to assimilate a concept that was inherently abstract and operationally ambiguous. While this approach was intended to fulfil the requirements of WH status, the lack of practical definition in UNESCO's concept of cultural sustainability posed significant challenges. Its ambiguity risked leading to inaction or superficial compliance, potentially reducing the designation to a symbolic title devoid of substantive impact. Such an outcome would not only undermine the value of WH recognition but also contradict its fundamental purpose of enhancing the conservation and management of cultural heritage while fostering cultural sustainability.

In the case of Amsterdam, however, this ambiguity was successfully navigated and transformed into context-sensitive solutions tailored to the city's unique urban and cultural fabric. The creation of standards, rather than rigid regulations, played a critical role in this process. It enabled Amsterdam to integrate global principles into its local governance framework without compromising its ability to address specific challenges. The shift from a decentralized governance model reliant on administrative offices to one that emphasized the expertise of individual public officers further

reinforced this adaptive approach. These professionals, drawing on interdisciplinary expertise, became central to the epistemological community devoted to advancing cultural sustainability. By fostering a consultative relationship between the administration and its citizens, this model not only enhanced public participation but also ensured that heritage management remained responsive to the city's evolving needs.

This enriched understanding of cultural sustainability has implications that extend beyond Amsterdam. It highlights the importance of moving beyond a rigid application of global criteria and toward a model that prioritizes contextual adaptation. In Amsterdam's case, the combination of professionalized governance and flexible regulatory standards illustrates how ambiguity in UNESCO's frameworks can serve as a catalyst for innovation rather than an impediment to effective heritage management. This approach underscores the necessity of translating abstract global principles into actionable strategies that align with local realities, ensuring that cultural sustainability becomes a dynamic and practical aspect of heritage governance. Nevertheless, this adaptive strategy raises important questions about the compatibility of such locally driven approaches with UNESCO's broader frameworks. As Amsterdam continues to innovate in its interpretation and application of cultural sustainability, potential tensions with UNESCO may emerge. For instance, local adaptive measures—such as modifying historical buildings to address environmental challenges like rising water levels—might be perceived by UNESCO as compromising the site's authenticity and integrity. Such scenarios underscore the ongoing debate between the imperatives of conservation and the need for adaptation in response to evolving challenges.

Ultimately, Amsterdam's case study offers a valuable perspective on the evolution of local governance processes in response to global heritage frameworks. It demonstrates that cultural sustainability is not a static concept but a fluid and context-dependent practice. By successfully navigating the tensions between naming and translating, Amsterdam has set an example of how cities can balance international obligations with local needs, fostering heritage management that is both innovative and sustainable. However, the broader implications of this approach remain uncertain,

particularly in terms of its acceptance within the WH system and its potential as a model for other sites grappling with similar challenges. In Amsterdam's case, the inherent ambiguity in UNESCO's concept of cultural sustainability was effectively navigated and translated into tailored solutions designed to meet the specific needs of the local context. A key factor in this success was the creation of flexible standards rather than rigid, prescriptive regulations, allowing the city to bridge the gap between global directives and local realities. This strategic shift was accompanied by a transformation in governance, moving away from a heavily decentralized system reliant on administrative offices to a model that foregrounded individual professional evaluations. By placing trust in the expertise of public officers, Amsterdam fostered a governance structure rooted in an epistemological community dedicated to cultural sustainability, where technical knowledge and interdisciplinary collaboration play central roles in decision-making.

On a micro-level, this approach demonstrated a careful and deliberate effort to recalibrate the relationship between citizens and the administration. Rather than imposing top-down directives, Amsterdam's public officers adopted a consultative and participatory dynamic, engaging directly with residents to balance regulatory requirements with the lived realities of urban life. This model not only strengthened the legitimacy of local governance but also enhanced its capacity to adapt to the complexities of managing a living urban heritage site. Such a system emphasizes inclusivity, responsiveness, and local empowerment, which are increasingly vital in navigating the tensions between conservation and modernization.

However, despite its effectiveness in fostering cultural sustainability, this locally tailored solution was neither explicitly guided by UNESCO nor fully aligned with the agency's overarching frameworks. As such, it is unlikely to be fully understood, let alone endorsed, by UNESCO as a model for best practices. This misalignment raises questions about the capacity of international heritage governance to accommodate diverse local approaches, particularly those that deviate from conventional interpretations of authenticity and integrity as defined by UNESCO. There is potential for tension to arise between Amsterdam and UNESCO in the future, especially if local adaptations

are perceived to conflict with the preservation values set forth by the WH Convention. A particularly pressing issue concerns the potential need for adaptive measures critical to Amsterdam's long-term survival, such as modifying historic buildings to address rising water levels. These actions, while necessary for the city's resilience, could be seen as compromising the visual and structural authenticity of the site as interpreted by UNESCO. This scenario underscores a broader, unresolved debate within the field of heritage management: how to reconcile the imperatives of conservation with the equally urgent need for adaptation in the face of evolving environmental, social, and urban challenges.

This ongoing tension invites critical reflection on the capacity of the WH system to adapt its frameworks to account for site-specific contexts and emergent global challenges. Amsterdam's case exemplifies the complexity of this balancing act, offering a compelling narrative of how ambiguity in global heritage principles can be leveraged to create pragmatic, context-sensitive solutions. However, it also highlights the risks of misalignment between local actions and global expectations, pointing to the need for greater flexibility and dialogue within UNESCO's governance structures to accommodate diverse interpretations of cultural sustainability. As cities like Amsterdam continue to innovate and adapt, the question remains whether the WH system will evolve to embrace such approaches or maintain its emphasis on more traditional paradigms of conservation. Building on the insights gleaned from the Amsterdam case study, the next chapter turns to Venice, a city that provides a striking counterpoint in the discourse on cultural sustainability and WH governance. Over the past decade, a pronounced and protracted conflict has unfolded between UNESCO and the public administration of Venice, revealing a divergence in perspectives on how the principles of cultural sustainability should be operationalized within the context of a WH site.

Venice presents a markedly different set of circumstances from Amsterdam. As a site with a much longer history of inscription on the WH List and facing more entrenched and multifaceted challenges, it offers a critical lens through which to examine the tensions between global directives and local agencies. These challenges include persistent threats to the preservation of authenticity and

integrity – key values underpinning UNESCO's designation – exacerbated by factors such as mass tourism, climate change, and urban decline. The complexity of Venice's situation has often placed the city at the centre of debates regarding the balance between conservation and adaptive reuse, further highlighting the difficulties in translating the frameworks of UNESCO into practical, context-sensitive policies.

The next chapter explores how the prolonged struggle to reconcile local governance needs with international expectations in Venice has influenced its strategies for heritage management. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which conflicting interpretations of cultural sustainability have shaped the city's response to external pressures, such as the construction of large-scale infrastructure projects and regulatory interventions aimed at controlling tourist flows. These actions have sparked contrasting views on whether Venice's approach constitutes a proactive adaptation to contemporary challenges or a departure from the values of authenticity and integrity championed by UNESCO. Through the analysis of governance processes, regulatory frameworks, and stakeholder dynamics in Venice, the chapter sheds light on the broader implications of managing WH sites in contexts of heightened complexity and contention. By examining Venice as a case study, it seeks to deepen the understanding of how cultural sustainability is interpreted, negotiated, and contested in sites where global heritage values intersect with urgent local needs. This discussion further refines the theoretical and practical frameworks explored in the Amsterdam case, offering a comparative perspective on the evolving role of cultural sustainability in WH management.

4. Venice in Danger: Cultural Sustainability and Governance Challenges in a World Heritage Site

4.1 Introduction

This chapter examines Venice as a critical case study in the discourse on cultural sustainability and World Heritage governance. Compared to Amsterdam, Venice faces entrenched and complex challenges shaped by its long-standing status as a WH site and its struggle to reconcile local governance imperatives with global expectations. Issues such as mass tourism, climate change, and urban decline have placed Venice at the centre of debates over balancing heritage conservation and adaptive reuse. Venice's governance framework reflects Italy's fragmented system – a tapestry of overlapping regulations and bureaucratic bodies influenced by attempts to adopt NPM principles while retaining centralized power structures. This complexity often hinders coherent management of cultural sustainability, especially during crises. Beyond local governance, Venice holds global significance as one of Italy's oldest cultural sites and among the first to be inscribed on the UNESCO WH List. Its inscription was a landmark moment for the global heritage movement. In recent years, however, Venice has become the subject of intense debate over its potential designation as 'In Danger,' revealing tensions between UNESCO's vision for cultural sustainability and the short-term priorities of local stakeholders driven by political and economic considerations. This chapter explores how competing interpretations of cultural sustainability have shaped Venice's strategies for managing its living heritage. By situating Venice within the broader context of global-local tensions, it provides insights into the evolving role of cultural sustainability in heritage management, offering a critical perspective on the complexities and contradictions of this domain, answering the question: *How do differing framings of cultural sustainability from UNESCO and local government influence policy responses?*

In July 2021 the UNESCO WH Committee rejected the proposal to inscribe Venice and its Lagoon (V&L hereinafter) in the List of WH In Danger. The proposal was advocated by experts, grassroots associations, and citizens to bring the case of safeguarding V&L to the attention of international institutions, thus framing the problems of V&L as a global concern (Brammer et al., 2019). Its rejection, instead, is the result of the Italian authorities' efforts to save Venice from being named 'Heritage In Danger', keeping the management of the crisis at a local level and weakening its scale and scope. Recognised as one of the most distinguished sites on the UNESCO WH List, V&L has always denoted interconnected problems arising from the interaction between environmental phenomena and human and administrative actions. This chapter investigates the relationship between UNESCO and V&L, focusing on the controversy surrounding its inscription in the List of WH In Danger (2011 – 2021). Motivated by a substantive interest in the topic (Eisenhardt, 1989b; Eisenhardt et al., 2016; Pfeffer, 2007), the study tackles how consensus over grand challenges is constructed and undermined, specifically: how does issue and process framing impact consensus-building in grand challenges? For this purpose, the chapter draws on frame theory in the analysis of the interactions between the parties. The interactional perspective on framing, encompassing the issues and process aspects of conflicts and meaning negotiations (Dewulf et al., 2009), is especially useful for explaining how parties construct collective interpretations through repeated interactions (Ansari et al., 2013; Donnellon et al., 1986).

The chapter is structured as follows. It begins by contextualizing Venice and its Lagoon, highlighting its geographical and historical significance as well as its governance framework, which includes a steering committee, a UNESCO office, and national authorities. A historical overview traces Venice’s journey from the devastating 1966 flood to its inscription on the UNESCO WH List and the subsequent evolution of its management challenges up to 2011. The methodology section outlines the qualitative longitudinal case study approach adopted for this research. Framing analysis is central to this approach, enabling a detailed examination of the interactions between stakeholders and the evolution of competing narratives over time. The analysis is supported by archival documents,

official reports, and interviews with key actors, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the case. The main analysis is divided into two phases. The first, spanning 2011 to 2015, explores how initial concerns about Venice's sustainability were framed by UNESCO and local actors, with significant input from civil society groups like Italia Nostra. The second phase, from 2016 to 2021, delves into escalating tensions over issues such as over-tourism and governance, including the City Council's counter-framing efforts to emphasize progress while deflecting criticisms. The chapter continues with a discussion of the broader implications of these framing conflicts, analysing the rhetorical strategies employed by various actors and the political dynamics that shape responses to Venice's challenges. It concludes by reflecting on cultural sustainability as a contested concept and the complexities of navigating global-local tensions in heritage governance. Through the lens of Venice, this chapter underscores the urgent need for more integrated and adaptive approaches to safeguarding living heritage in the face of mounting environmental and social pressures.

4.2 Research Setting

V&L was one of the first sites listed in the UNESCO WH List in 1987. UNESCO, a United Nations agency, was born in the aftermath of World War II with the aim of identifying, protecting, and preserving cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of Outstanding Universal Value (WH Centre, 2019). The exceptional nature of the WH concept lies in its universal applicability, as WH sites are considered the heritage of all global communities, regardless of their geographic location (Labadi, 2013). This value is embodied in the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage adopted by UNESCO in 1972. The Convention defines natural or cultural sites that can be considered for inscription on the WH List and is translated into the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the WH Convention, which establish the procedures for the protection of WH properties. To date 194 states have adhered to the Convention, becoming Member states of UNESCO.

Although UNESCO may appear to be a monolithic entity, in fact this meta-organisation (Hoggart, 2011) is composed of national states, and it is structured in several bodies acting on different levels and in different spheres. Composed of representatives of the Member states, the WH Committee is the main body in charge of implementing the Convention and Operational Guidelines. The Executive Board is UNESCO's general management body. A Director General, who serves as UNESCO's chief administrator, heads it. The WH Centre is the focal point and coordinator within UNESCO for all matters related to the day-to-day management of the WH List. UNESCO also has Advisory Bodies (in the case of Venice, the bodies involved are the International Council on Monuments and Sites – ICOMOS – and experts from the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands) that provide the WH Committee with evaluations on the nominated cultural and natural sites.

Since the 1972 Convention, the criteria of UNESCO for site designation have changed significantly. In its early stages, UNESCO had looser procedures: the monitoring, management plan, and buffer area of the properties were not required at the time of the inscription (Foster, 2015). Therefore, the oldest UNESCO sites had to keep up with new requirements and procedures over the years. The idea of WH sites as an organisation that needs to be managed was relatively recently introduced, while in the beginning being on the UNESCO List was mostly a matter of international recognition (Labadi, 2013).

Once a country signs the WH Convention (UNESCO WH Centre, 1972), and has sites added to the WH List (UNESCO WH Committee, 2021b), the resulting prestige often helps raise awareness among citizens and governments for heritage preservation, typically resulting in a higher level of protection of the heritage properties. Less often a country may also receive financial assistance and advice from the WH Committee to support preservation initiatives (UNESCO WH Centre, 1972). If the OUV of the property is threatened in terms of authenticity and integrity – whether for environmental reasons (floods, wildfire, erosion, etc.) or human actions (wars, demolition, extinction, gentrification, etc.) – a site can be nominated for the List of WH in Danger. The list is a supporting

mechanism of UNESCO that seeks to raise international help to effectively address the challenges faced by the property (Article 11.4, UNESCO WH Centre, 1972).

If threats to the authenticity and/or integrity of the OUV are not dealt with according to the suggestions provided by WH experts, the WH Committee may decide to remove the property from the WH List altogether (UNESCO WH Centre, 1972). To date, 56 properties are listed as sites In Danger, while only three properties since the 1972 Convention have been delisted.

4.3 Findings

Antecedents (1966 – 2011)

The flood that devastated Venice in 1966 is acknowledged as one of the triggering events that led to the UNESCO Convention in 1972 (ICOMOS, 1986). Even before the approval of the Convention, in the Report on Venice UNESCO (UNESCO, 1969) already advocated for the protection of Venice for its intrinsic fragile nature and its worldwide cultural significance (ICOMOS, 1986). The inscription of V&L as a WH site was approved in 1987 after nine years of consultations, a long political path that involved several Italian institutions (Ministry of Culture, Municipality and Province of Venice) and was strongly supported by UNESCO itself, that saw the inclusion of V&L in the WH List as an opportunity to 'further strengthen the coherency of the cultural policy of UNESCO' (ICOMOS, 1986: 1). The area identified as the WH site includes the historical city centre of Venice and the entire lagoon area, for a total of 70,176.4 ha of property under the administrative jurisdiction of 21 different entities.

In the first 25 years, no problems were reported concerning the state of preservation of the site, neither by the Italian state nor by UNESCO. This happened even though in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s civil society carried out several inquiries and mobilisations for the preservation of Venice. None of these serious concerns, however, was brought to the attention of UNESCO, in fact Venice issues were handled locally, without requiring the intervention of the international agency. The only mention of Venice in the UNESCO documents relates to concerns raised over the Italian proposal,

later withdrawn, to host Expo 2000 in Venice (UNESCO WH Committee, 1989, 1990). However, demonstrations, protests, and public calls for action escalated in intensity through the years, eventually leading Italia Nostra – a national grassroots association for the safeguarding of historical, artistic, and natural heritage – to call out UNESCO in 2011. This marks a turning point in the relationships between UNESCO and the Italian authorities responsible for the V&L site, triggering the 'In Danger' controversy.

Phase 1. Setting Concerns (2011 – 2015)

As mentioned above, from 2011, Italia Nostra started addressing the WH Committee on the poor state of conservation and maintenance of V&L through several letters (one in 2011, two in 2012), thus bringing Venice-related issues to the attention of the international community. Problems concerning over-tourism, the 'exponential increase in second homes as a financial investment', depopulation, and the impacts of port activities on the fragile lagoon environment were central to Italia Nostra's outcry. In its dossiers, the association explicitly blamed the institutions overseeing the site, namely the Venice City Council and the Port Authority, deemed to 'pay attention [only] to jobs and the economy' (Italia Nostra, 2015, p. 11), focusing on 'short-term aims rather than the protection of Venice, leaving Venice and its inhabitants [..] at the mercy of narrow economic interests' (Italia Nostra, 2015, p. 1).

In addressing the WH Centre, Italia Nostra stated that 'the preconditions to maintain Venice and its Lagoon on the WH List no longer exist' (Italia Nostra, 2015: 1). The association believed, in fact, that 'only the intervention of an independent institution, one from outside the country, could save this city [Venice]: a decision by UNESCO could be the only hope for keeping this cultural heritage site, which is unique in the world' (Italia Nostra, 2015:2).

Following this bottom-up pressure, the WH Centre required explanations on the state of conservation of the site to the State Party (WH Centre, 2014). On 29 January 2014, the State Party submitted a detailed state of conservation report including descriptions of a number of new large maritime infrastructures to allow ultra-large ships mainly handle oil, bulk and container traffic to call

at the Port of Venice. For the WH Centre, the report produced by Italian authorities confirmed the concerns already raised by Italia Nostra. For instance, according to the WH Centre, the 'extent and scale of proposals for large infrastructure, navigation and construction projects in the Lagoon and its immediate setting, [that] would appear to have the potential to seriously jeopardise the OUV of the property'. On this ground, the WH Centre believed that 'the cumulative impacts on the OUV of the property [needed] to be comprehensively assessed' (WH Centre, 2014).

The case of V&L was then discussed at the 38th meeting of the WH Committee in 2014. The WH Committee aligned its view with the WH Centre and, although indirectly, also with Italia Nostra. Consequently, the Committee approved a Monitoring Mission to V&L for October 2015 'to review if the property is faced with threats which could have deleterious effects on its inherent characteristics and meets the criteria for its inscription on the List of WH In Danger' (UNESCO WH Committee, 2014). In addition, in 2014 the Committee issued also a set of requests to the State Party, including the enforcement of speed limits for boats, the prohibition of the largest ships and tankers from entering the Lagoon, and the need to develop 'solutions to allow cruise tourists to enjoy and understand the value of Venice and also its fragility' (WH Committee, 2014). These recommendations are worth mentioning as they will represent one of the objects of the dispute at later stages. The time gap between the first dossier of Italia Nostra and the decisions of the WH Committee (from 2011 to 2014) shows the complexity of the decision-making process that characterises the UN agency, which took a few years before issuing a mission to the site and some recommendations.

The dossiers by Italia Nostra and documentation developed by distinct UNESCO bodies – WH Centre and WH Committee – included an initial framing of the issues affecting V&L in their diagnostical and prognostic elements (Benford & Snow, 2000; Entman, 1993). It must be remembered that these issues were not unknown: as previously commented, civil society had already developed a discourse on the protection of Venice for more than 40 years. However, in contrast to the situation analysed in the 'Antecedent' section, the intervention of UNESCO on the matter of safeguarding V&L brought the case of Venice to the international arena, positioning the challenge as one of

international interest and calling for a co-participated action, where both local authorities and UNESCO entities were involved (Brammer et al., 2019).

Phase 2. Processing the Threat (2016 – 2021)

This phase is marked by the attempt to negotiate the meaning and magnitude of the grand challenge, including discussion over its causes, its responsibilities, and possible solutions. This is the reason why it was named 'Processing the Threat': to stress how, despite the issue frame dispute between the WH Centre and the City of Venice occurring at this stage, the interaction between parties unfolds according to the standard UNESCO procedure. This implies experts' assessment, followed by the back-and-forth of recommendations and replies.

Making the Grand Challenge (2016): the Unsustainability of Venice and its Lagoon

The first Mission to the V&L site lasted five days. The mission team was composed of three commissioners, one for each Advisory Body involved, namely ICOMOS, Ramsar, and the WH Centre (UNESCO WH Committee, 2014). The program included meetings with local authorities (Port Authority, the Mayor, several offices of the municipality of Venice, etc.) and civil society (NGOs and grassroots associations), involving an intensive collection of data. Following UNESCO procedures, a Mission Report was prepared (UNESCO, 2016), gathering the observations of the experts involved. Published in 2016 (a few months after the mission), the UNESCO Report includes an in-depth diagnosis of the main issues negatively affecting the site, a call to the local administration to take responsibility for the (mis)management of the site, and a roadmap of interventions for the years to follow.

The report criticizes some of the development projects presented by the city of Venice (including, for example, the MoSE water gates and a new terminal for big ships), highlighting the potential 'disastrous effects on the ecosystem and also on cultural values' (UNESCO, 2016, p. 25). Next, the report broadly presents the site's main threats to its overall authenticity and integrity, which are the two criteria that allow a site to be part of the WH List. The issues affecting the site include

over-tourism, its negative effects on the housing market, the crowding out of inhabitants, conversion of apartments for tourist use, loss of local craftsmanship, and the maintenance of buildings. Other issues regard development projects and how they affect the property: the 'deleterious' activities of the Port (UNESCO, 2016, p. 32), further expansions of Venice airport, the erosion of the lagoon caused by large ships and the excavation of new canals, and the lack of speed limits for water traffic. Although treated in distinct paragraphs, these issues were presented as intertwined, with frequent references to cause-effect relationships, thus mirroring a multidimensional and multidisciplinary approach to the problem of V&L conservation. The text below provides an example of the severity and interconnectedness of the problems affecting the site with respect to over-tourism and depopulation:

> Even more considerable and concerning are the effects of ever-increasing tourism, in all of its forms, dominating and obscuring the traditional urban society of the historical city. The relationship between the capacity of the historical city, the number of its inhabitants and the number of tourists is out of balance and causing significant damage to the material and cultural urban context. The loss of population in the historical city is alarming; it has several causes, the most important is the pressure on affordable apartments. A further grave problem is the changing use of houses, converted from normal housing into accommodations for visitors. (UNESCO, 2016, p. 7)

The allocation of responsibilities complements the diagnostic component of the report. In fact, the authors explicitly blame the authorities who have authority over the site. In addition to the critique of ongoing development projects, reference is made to the 'lack of coordination' or 'lack of a shared vision for Venice among the many different stakeholders at national, regional and local levels' (UNESCO, 2016, p. 7). In other words, for the experts, the roots of the problems are not just natural and human, but mainly due to poor administration.

The diagnosis is followed by 24 recommendations divided into 12 themes. The experts' core framing (e.g. Benford & Snow, 2000) is characterised by an articulation of the issue of sustainability along various dimensions, starting with the problems of sustainable tourism strategies and programs (extensively in the report); to integrated solutions of sustainability 'in the environmental, economic and social sense' (UNESCO, 2016, p. 19); with reference to the development of tools of

'sustainability in an extensive key, including economic, ecological and social sustainability' (UNESCO, 2016, p. 35).

The request to take immediate and drastic actions permeates the whole report. This 'call to arms' (Feront & Bertels, 2021, p. 20) is pursued by using hyperboles, as with the dimension of big ships, which are defined as 'shocking out of scale,' or by dramatising the message through selected adjectives, as with big ship accidents, which may be 'disastrous' or housing conditions, defined as 'indecent.' Drawing on the report's findings at the 2016 session of the WH Committee in Istanbul, the Advisory Bodies recommended considering the inscription of V&L in the List of WH In Danger (see Annex 1). The Decision approved by the WH Committee (UNESCO WH Committee, 2016) 'endorses' the experts' framing and requests the State Party to implement all urgent recommendations and to report on them.

Minimising the Grand Challenge (2017): The City Council Counter-Framing

The experts' mission occurred a few months after the election of the new Venice Mayor Luigi Brugnaro. In the political settlement of Venice, these elections were an historic turning point in a city of 'left-wing' tradition. The new Mayor promoted the interests of the port and the mainland in general during the electoral campaign, emphasising 'the importance of the cruise ship industry in the Veneto region' and supporting 'a new route into the city of Venice that would require dredging' (Kirchgaessner, 2015).

The reply of the city of Venice, dating (2017), included a long description of the vision of the newly appointed city administration for the years to follow ('illustrative content report,' City of Venice, 2017, p. 10-26), a critique of the experts' analysis ('response to the recommendations,' City of Venice, 2017, p. 27-66) as well as a long list of annexes, included in their original format (600 pages in Italian). The 'illustrative content report' explicitly traces the electoral program of the newly appointed Mayor of Venice (citing and making direct reference to the so-called 'Mayor's Document,' attached to the report). The document presents future projects and activities, funds that will be allocated, and depicts Venice as the future development hub for northern Italy. In particular, the

document stresses the joint willingness of national and local authorities to work for the economic development of the area, to be achieved through:

> 'The creation of new industrial investments, redevelopment and re-industrialisation of the production areas, the economic and functional conversion of the industrial area of Porto Marghera, and any action functional to the economic development, production and employment in the metropolitan territory.' (City of Venice, 2017, p. 5)

In the 'response to the recommendations' section, the City Council engages with the experts' framing proposing a counter-framing that initiates the dispute on the meaning and magnitude of the grand challenge. The counter-framing proposed by the City Council centres on three key issues. First, the City Council relativises the site's problems by placing them in a broader time and space. The aim is to show that, historically speaking, there have been progressive improvements on many issues. For example, data relating to arrivals to the Port of Venice from 2011 to 2015 are displayed to exhibit a 'reduction in the number of cruise ships arriving at the Port of Venice' (City of Venice, 2017, p. 50), thus claiming that the phenomenon is under control. Similarly, in contrast to the experts, who reported a sharp decrease in population in the City of Venice (*centro storico*)[2] from 175.000 in 1951 to 56.00 in 2014 (UNESCO, 2016, p. 40), the City Council argued that 'population decline is a phenomenon involving our whole country and arises principally from the declining birth rate, together with the decline due to natural death' (City of Venice, 2017: 33), thus downplaying the whole issue. The second argument relates to claiming current and future commitments. Verbs in present continuous or future tenses are widely used in the reply, as in the following examples:

> 'Tourist flows recognition and sustainability project will start in summer 2017' (City of Venice, 2017, p. 41).

> 'All institutions involved are working in agreement…aware of the enormous responsibility assumed' (City of Venice, 2017: 7).

There is therefore a stark contrast between the request of the WH Committee, which was asking for a progress report on specific issues, and the approach of the City Council, which is listing

[2] http://www.comune.venezia.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/4055.

initiatives to be implemented in the future. The third argument developed by the City Council relates to explaining the lack of action by linking it to the fragmentation of competencies and jurisdictions, with the aim of distributing responsibilities to other administrative bodies. For example, as far as speed limits are concerned, the City Council reports that:

> 'In the Venice lagoon, a particular regulation in place subtracts part of the police functions and the organisation of navigation from the Municipal Marine Authority to assign it to other bodies in significant areas of the lagoon boundary itself' (City of Venice, 2017: 43).

To recap, the making of V&L as a site In Danger involved three key arguments: the problems of the site were urgent and out of scale, the actions (or lack thereof) of those managing the site were part of the problem, solutions could be found only through a holistic approach, considering problems as interconnected. The City Council of Venice, instead, engaged in minimising the challenge by downplaying Venice's issues, distributing blame, and showing commitment toward future rather than immediate action, offering a discrete framing of the grand challenge.

Between Making and Minimising (2018 – 2021).

This phase shows an attempt to align the views of the two parties involved in the dispute. The decisions issued between 2017 and 2019 (UNESCO WH Committee, 2017, 2019) employ the diplomatic language commonly used in documents of this kind. For example, in the 2017 Decision the WH committee 'notes with appreciation' the improvements implemented in the V&L site, 'acknowledge the drafting of the Climate Plan' or 'welcomes the details submitted regarding the new sustainable tourism strategy.' The documents presented by the Venice City Council to the WH Committee (City of Venice, 2018, 2020) provide additional information on the ongoing actions taken, as required by the WH Committee, without the contesting elements characterising the 2017 Reply Report.

However, the mention that Venice could be placed on the List of WH in Danger persisted in all WH Committee decisions published between 2018 and 2021. This procedure, similar to several rounds of review in the publication of an academic paper, involves withdrawing the threat only when

the dangers have been solved. This shows that for the WH committee threatening to include a site in the In Danger list is a less risky option than making the threat real. Threatening a site allows the WH committee to maintain the State Party under constant pressure and obtain incremental changes, without paying the political price of displeasing a country that signed the convention.

On their side, Italian authorities showed no particular concern for the perpetuation of the threat. In fact, the national press highlighted the events as a renewed commitment on both sides to 'save' Venice from the In Danger List. Indeed, the meeting between the Mayor of Venice and the Director General of UNESCO in Paris was celebrated as a peace treaty:

> We will work together: UNESCO, the government, the municipality, and all the stakeholders… I perceived the strength of the commitment of the city and the government. (Bokova, in Padovan, 2017)

In this atmosphere of renewed collaboration, in 2019 the city of Venice invited an Advisory Mission by ICOMOS, Ramsar, and WH Centre to the site. While the purpose of an Advisory Mission was to provide advice on site management, for the City Council it also represented an opportunity to show improvements and possibly eliminate the threat. The Advisory Mission took place in 2020, involving the same ICOMOS and Ramsar commissioners of the 2015 Mission, and a new WH Centre commissioner.

The subsequent Mission Report was published in early 2021 and confirmed the critical state of conservation already described in the 2016 UNESCO Report. This document further articulates the criticisms previously raised, identifying 50 recommendations for preserving the site (UNESCO, 2021, p. 59-64). In reviewing each issue, the experts point out the worsening condition of the site, the lack of effective actions by the administration, and the failure to comply with the recommendations of the 2016 Report. Given the analysis of the experts, the WH Centre concluded that:

> The continued deteriorating effects of human intervention, combined with climate change on the vulnerable Lagoon ecosystem, threaten to result in irreversible change. The resolution to these long-standing problems is hindered by a lack of overall vision and low efficiency of the integrated coordinated management on all stakeholder levels. These factors warrant the inscription of the property on the List of WH in Danger (UNESCO, 2021).

Phase 3. Politicising the Threat (2021 – ongoing)

Given the input of the WH Centre, on the day of the WH Committee session on 22 July 2021 everything was set to declare V&L a site In Danger, as depicted in the draft shared with participants for approval during the meeting:

> 'The WH Committee… [e]xpresses concerns that despite the progress assessed on several issues identified, crucial problems remain yet unresolved…Considers therefore that the property is faced with ascertained and potential danger due to individual threats and their cumulative impacts and decides, in conformity with Paragraph 178 of the Operational Guidelines, to inscribe Venice and its Lagoon (Italy) on the List of WH in Danger.'

The reference to the Operational Guidelines in the decision draft confirms that the procedure set off in the prior phase is still unfolding. Yet, right at the beginning of the session dedicated to V&L, a deviation from the procedural path can be observed. The Secretariat informed the WH Committee session Chair that, despite State Parties should not provide last-minute information, two days earlier (on 20 July 2021) the WH Committee received a letter from the Italian delegation. The letter concerned a decree approved by the Italian government few days earlier that bans the transit of big ships of more than 25,000 tons from the main water streams of the Venice city centre: the San Marco and the Giudecca Canals.

Then, during the Committee meeting, the Ethiopian delegate took the floor and stated that the ban 'of large cruise ships fully implements the most relevant request of the committee concerning the protection of the site, it is a wise decision that was long expected, which testifies to the commitment of Italy' (Henok Teferra, in WH Committee, 2021, [emphasis added]). On this basis, the delegate proposed to halt the inscription of V&L from the List of WH In Danger and to change the draft of the decision text accordingly. The WH Committee next unanimously approved the amended version. During the comment session that took place after the voting, the delegate a consortium of Venetian grassroots associations 'deeply deplored' the decision taken by the WH Committee as 'it missed the chance to uphold the credibility of the WH List and to trigger the State Party to engage in

the vital discussions with civil society and to take timely action' (WH Watch, in UNESCO WH Committee, 2021a).

What happened? Disentangling elements relating to issue and process framing can help the understanding of this very last phase.

On the issue side, a further minimisation of V&L-related problems and solutions took place. The City of Venice has many problems but not that serious, and their solution, although challenging because of institutional fragmentation, was deemed to be feasible in the future. The Italian Government continued this line of argument, reducing multiple issues to a single, highly visible, and symbolic problem: the Big Ships. But differently from the City Council, when the odds of the inscription in the List of WH In Danger became high, the Italian Government proposed a definitive solution taking over the City Council: the ban of Big Ships. While at first sight (and for the members of the Committee), this could sound like an effective solution at least to one of the problems of Venice, at a more careful analysis, the scope of the decree appears problematic. The approved decree, in fact, limited the ban to the San Mark' and Giudecca Canals, a highly visible but significantly small part of the whole lagoon. In other words, the ban partially copes rather than 'fully implements' the requests of WH experts (see Annex 2 for a visual representation of the lagoon).

Over-simplification on the issue side was coupled with a significant frame shift on the process side. From analytically discussing the recommendations of the experts one by one, in a yearlong trial of strengths between arguments, the interaction in phase 3 aimed mainly at securing political consensus in the assembly, where the voting takes place, in a situation affected by the factionalism of the voting parties (the States Members in this case). According to a source that requested to remain anonymous, the Italian Government engaged in many diplomatic efforts to collect votes, a strategy that eventually paid off, as the performance of the Ethiopian delegate shows. This is not big news: prior literature has extensively studied how decisions in the WH Committee are mainly based on 'gifting and exchanges' between countries (Meskell, 2015, p. 17). Concisely, this phase was labelled 'politicising the threat' to capture the over-simplification of the problems of V&L on the issue side

and the exchange vote logic on the process side. More in general, during this last phase, the whole controversy is transformed into a matter of national prestige, where being off the List of WH In Danger became a goal in itself, as reflected in the words of the Ministry of Culture:

> The inclusion of Venice in the List of WH In Danger has been warded off. Thanks to the government's decisions to block the passage of large ships in front of St. Mark's and the Giudecca Canal, a first, important result has been achieved.' (Ministry of Culture, 2021)

In Table 12, it is provided a synthetical representation of issues and process framing throughout the discrete phases.

Framing Process	***Actors***	***Setting Concerns*** (2011 – 2015)	***Processing the Threat*** (2016 – 2021)	***Politicising the Threat*** (2021 - ongoing)
Issue Framing	Advisory Bodies	Making: *Venice issues are a matter of international concern*	Making: *Many issues and not managed, Venice at risk*	Making: *Issues got worse, Venice is In Danger*
	Venice City Council	Process not at play	Minimizing: *Venice's issues are not 'that' serious*	Over Simplification: *Reducing Venice's issue to one (Big Ships)*
Process Framing	Advisory Bodies	Experts' Assessment: *Need for more information and UNESCO intervention*	Experts' Assessment: *Continuing to consider the In Danger List*	Experts' Assessment: *Venice inclusion in the In Danger List*
	Venice City Council	Process not at play	Experts' Assessment: *Compiling to UNESCO procedural requests*	Vote Exchange: *Avoiding the In Danger List*
	WH Committee	Experts' Assessment: *Bringing civil society concerns to UN discussion*	Experts' Assessment: *Monitoring and reviewing the site*	Vote Exchange: *Accepting over-simplification*

Table 12 Issue and process framing processes at play across phases

Epilogue?

Although beyond the time span covered by the study, two elements following the 2021 decision are worth mentioning. First, to date uncertainty and contradictions characterise the plans concerning a more radical ban of Big Ships from the lagoon. While on the one hand a competition of ideas for the new port offshore has been recently re-opened (Venezia Today, 2024), on the other the Port Authority is planning huge investments to 'temporarily' consent Big Ships to dock inside the lagoon (Bison, 2024). To make things even more confusing – or clear, depending on the perspectives - the Mayor of

Venice recently declared: 'Let it be clear, the cruise ships will return to the Marittima [i.e. city centre]. They elected me for this' (Venezia Today, 2023). Second, in June 2023 the WH Centre proposed again to inscribe V&L in the List of WH In Danger (WH Committee, 2023). During the Committee, the delegate of Japan intervened to amend the Draft Decision, effectively succeeding in halting the inscription in the List of WH In Danger. The key argument in the amendment was the introduction of entrance tickets to regulate access to the historical city centre, which was approved by the Venice City Council on 12 September 2023, exactly the day before the WH Committee meeting. Once again, the decision by the WH Committee was celebrated at a national level, as acknowledged in the words of the Italian Ministry of Culture at that time:

> 'This is a victory for all of Italy. It is a defeat also for those who play politics...common sense has prevailed…this was an unnecessary, purely political manoeuvre without any basis in objective fact. Venice is therefore not in danger'. (Franceschini, in (Somers Cocks, 2023)

4.4 Navigating the Tensions of Cultural Sustainability: The Case of Venice and the Politics of Heritage Conservation

For over four decades, scholars, associations, and civil society have advocated for the identification and proactive addressing of the challenges affecting Venice. Empirical findings indicate that the proposed frame was met with opposition on two distinct levels, namely the issues at hand and the process-related aspects – each yielding a disparate outcome. In the realm of issues (Felstiner et al., 1980; Putnam & Holmer, 1992), a lack of consensus prevails. Frame disputes endure, displaying a noteworthy dichotomy between the framing and counter-framing of the crisis. This divergence unfolds in the interpretation of the crisis as urgent, administratively induced, and interconnected, juxtaposed with opposing arguments that advocate non-urgency, diffuse responsibilities, and future commitment. Nevertheless, despite the enduring disparities, some progress in risk mitigation was made, particularly in the period spanning 2018 to 2021, attributable to the heightened perception of a threat. This aligns with insights positing that in circumstances where crisis mitigation is

unavoidable, authorities exhibit a preference for incremental changes over radical transformation (Boin et al., 2009), at least temporarily.

With regard to the process dimension (Putnam & Holmer, 1992; Stokes & Hewitt, 1976), a frame shift is observed. A frame shift denotes a displacement of one conceptual framework by another owing to a modification in the underlying premises upon which the displaced frame was constructed (D. A. Snow et al., 2018). Over a significant period, all stakeholders engaged in expert assessments. This meant that, despite the dispute at the issue level, all the actors agreed upon playing within this procedure, defined by drafting reports, issuing decisions, and providing requests and replies. However, when the inclusion on V&L in the In Danger List seemed unavoidable, the Italian authorities and the WH Committee transitioned from expert assessment to political gaming. The immediate consequence of this shift was the obstruction of activities that put the site on the List of WH In Danger, substituting incremental actions with high-visibility interventions. Therefore, by changing the rules of the game at the last minute, the interaction was shifted from one based on expert assessments to another based on political gamesmanship.

The case of V&L unpacks how the parties initiating the dispute (in the making) and those responding (in minimising and politicising) use ambiguity differently. Previous studies have investigated the strategic value of leveraging ambiguity to instigate transformative processes concerning contentious issues (Etzion & Ferraro, 2010; Gioia et al., 2012). It has been noted that ambiguity can foster the collective engagement of organisational actors without necessitating explicit consensus (van Wijk et al., 2013). Feront and Bertles (2021) posit that when the proponent's framing is characterised by low ambiguity, it is less effective, as it tends to induce decoupling, rejection, and avoidance among those who should align with the proposed framing. However, there is scarce knowledge of how ambiguity unfolds in the reactive framing of the respondent. This case study depicts how framing ambiguity can be used as a tool to respond and deconstruct. Notably, a low level of ambiguity in the proponents' framing emerges, but an exceedingly prominent level of ambiguity characterises the responses from those engaging in the dispute. While experts' diagnostic, prognostic,

and motivational assessments provide an in-depth analysis of problems and causes, realistic temporal guidelines, and clarify the urgency for action, a heightened ambiguity characterises the replies and the processes undertaken by the respondents.

Ambiguity manifests across multiple dimensions, encompassing issues, processes, and actors. At the issue level, this is exemplified by the blurring of technical solutions and specific interests. For instance, the 2021 legislation concerning Big Ships does not address the technical problem at hand – the hydro-geological impacts of hulls on the lagoon – nor does it prompt a discussion on the specificities of the phenomenon, nor define any roadmap and deadline for eventually banning Big Ships from the Lagoon. At the process level, the response initially adopts the expert assessment; due to the ineffectiveness of this strategy, there is a transition to political gaming. Ambiguity in issues and processes leads to ambiguous conduct by the actors involved. In fact, a shift in the stance of the WH Committee is observed: initially supportive of expert opinion, subsequently embracing political gaming through the voting system. Simultaneously, the state party does not dispel the ambiguity of its position, refraining from actions such as withdrawing from the UNESCO convention or consenting to the inclusion of V&L in the List of WH In Danger. Instead, it opts to remain within UNESCO while pushing the boundaries of the established rules. In summary, ambiguity assumes a critical role in displacing the grand challenge. In contrast with the study conducted by Feront and Bertels (2021), the low ambiguity framing introduced at the onset of the interaction did not elicit a frame rejection. Instead, ambiguity was strategically employed as a response. Here, ambiguity facilitates the coexistence of contradictory instances, encompassing values, interests, and processes.

Furthermore, the chapter unravels the twofold role of rhetoric as both a sensemaking process and a persuasive tool. In the making, the effectiveness of naming and framing (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014) is apparent. By interpreting V&L as a site In Danger, associations and international experts initiate collective action, strategically applying pressure on the state party. In the making, rhetoric emerges as a generative sense-making process in framing the grand challenge. In the process of minimising and, especially, politicising, rhetoric assumes a role of persuasion and manipulation, as

observed in more classic applications of rhetoric (Werner & Cornelissen, 2014). For example, the partial solution of banning Big Ships from the San Marco Basin and Giudecca Canal in 2021 is presented as a significant step forward in safeguarding V&L, despite the partial nature of the regulation. The latter tactic aligns with the concept of cognitive shortcuts, which are created by 'breaking down a multi-faceted wicked problem into sub-problems from which a single or a few points of leverage with plausible links to the target are handpicked' (Reinecke & Ansari, 2016, p. 316). While the constructive function of cognitive shortcuts is explored in Reinecke and Ansari (2016), here it is analysed in its application in de-constructing a grand challenge. In the V&L case study, this rhetorical strategy is employed to maintain the appearance of adherence to expert assessment while engaging in political gaming.

Ambiguity and the concept of cultural sustainability

The story of Venice is emblematic of the complexities faced by WH sites in reconciling global conservation imperatives with local governance realities. This chapter has explored how differing framings of cultural sustainability by UNESCO and local authorities have influenced the city's policy responses, often leading to clashes rather than cooperation. The lessons drawn from the case study of Venice reveal critical insights into the challenges and possibilities of achieving cultural sustainability in heritage management.

At the heart of these challenges lies the concept of cultural sustainability itself – a term that encompasses the intertwined dimensions of social, environmental, and heritage conservation goals. UNESCO's framing of cultural sustainability reflects an evolving understanding of this concept, one that extends beyond preserving the material authenticity and integrity of a site to addressing its broader socio-economic and environmental contexts. In Venice, this approach has brought attention to issues such as overtourism, climate change, and the loss of local population, presenting these challenges as interconnected and requiring integrated solutions. However, this expansive framing of sustainability has not been without resistance. Local authorities in Venice, constrained by political,

economic, and administrative realities, have often adopted alternative framings that prioritize short-term economic benefits, particularly from tourism, over long-term preservation goals. The reliance on tourism as an economic lifeline has driven a market-oriented approach to sustainability, often characterized by symbolic gestures and greenwashing rather than substantive action. This divergence between UNESCO's global vision and Venice's local priorities has underscored the contested nature of cultural sustainability and highlighted the difficulty of translating global frameworks into actionable local policies.

The dynamics of this conflict were brought into sharp relief during the decade-long 'In Danger' controversy, a period marked by intense debates over whether Venice should be inscribed on the UNESCO List of WH in Danger. From 2011 to 2021, the interactions between UNESCO and local authorities revealed competing interpretations of the city's challenges and the appropriate responses. UNESCO framed Venice's issues as urgent and multifaceted, calling for comprehensive interventions to address overtourism, environmental degradation, and governance fragmentation. In contrast, local authorities engaged in counter-framing strategies that downplayed the severity of these issues, emphasized incremental improvements, and shifted responsibility to other administrative bodies. These framing conflicts reflected deeper tensions between global and local priorities. UNESCO's framing sought to position Venice as a symbol of the challenges facing heritage sites worldwide, advocating for solutions that would set a precedent for cultural sustainability on a global scale. Local authorities, however, viewed the potential designation of Venice as 'In Danger' as a threat to the city's reputation and economic viability. This tension culminated in 2021 when a last-minute decree banning large cruise ships from Venice's main waterways was presented as a decisive solution, successfully averting the 'In Danger' designation. Yet, the decree's limited scope and symbolic nature highlighted the persistent gap between rhetoric and action in the city's approach to sustainability.

The case study of Venice underscores the role of governance in shaping heritage management outcomes. The city's fragmented administrative structure – a patchwork of overlapping jurisdictions

and regulatory bodies – has hindered the development and implementation of cohesive sustainability strategies. Attempts to incorporate NPM principles into this system have further complicated governance, creating inefficiencies and tensions among stakeholders. This institutional fragmentation has often undermined efforts to address the systemic challenges facing Venice, leaving the city vulnerable to the pressures of overtourism, climate change, and urban decline. Beyond its governance challenges, Venice serves as a microcosm of the broader struggles facing WH sites in the 21st century. As global challenges such as climate change, urbanization, and mass tourism intensify, heritage sites are increasingly caught between the need to preserve their unique cultural and natural values and the pressures of economic and political realities. The case of Venice illustrates how these tensions manifest in the framing and negotiation of sustainability goals, with significant implications for the effectiveness of heritage conservation policies.

One of the key takeaways from Venice's experience is the importance of aligning global and local perspectives on cultural sustainability. While UNESCO's framing has provided a valuable framework for understanding the multidimensional nature of Venice's challenges, its implementation has often been hindered by a lack of alignment with local priorities and capacities. This misalignment has not only limited the effectiveness of conservation efforts but also fuelled perceptions of UNESCO as an external authority imposing unrealistic expectations on local stakeholders. To address these challenges, there is a need for more adaptive and collaborative approaches to heritage governance. Such approaches should prioritize dialogue and partnership between global and local actors, fostering a shared vision for sustainability that reflects both the universal values of heritage and the specific needs of local communities. In the case of Venice, this could involve creating platforms for greater stakeholder engagement, enhancing the capacity of local authorities to implement sustainability measures, and exploring innovative funding mechanisms to reduce the city's dependency on tourism revenue.

Moreover, the case study of Venice highlights the need to move beyond symbolic actions and greenwashing toward more substantive and systemic solutions. This requires a shift in governance

practices to prioritize long-term planning, integrated policy-making, and genuine accountability. For example, addressing overtourism in Venice will require not only regulating visitor numbers but also rethinking the city's economic model to promote diversification and resilience. Similarly, tackling environmental challenges will necessitate a comprehensive approach to lagoon management that balances ecological restoration with infrastructure development. As a WH site, Venice holds a unique position as both a symbol of humanity's shared cultural heritage and a test case for the future of heritage governance. Its experiences offer valuable lessons for other heritage sites grappling with similar challenges, from the Great Barrier Reef in Australia to the historic cities of Europe and Asia. By examining the dynamics of framing, negotiation, and policy-making in Venice, this chapter contributes to a broader understanding of the factors that shape cultural sustainability in practice.

In conclusion, Venice's story is a powerful reminder of what is at stake in the fight to protect our shared cultural heritage. It highlights the need for a paradigm shift in heritage governance, one that embraces the complexities of cultural sustainability and prioritizes collaboration, innovation, and inclusivity. By learning from the challenges and opportunities presented by Venice, policymakers, stakeholders, and communities can work toward a future where heritage sites are not only preserved but thrive as living embodiments of our collective values and aspirations. As the world faces growing environmental and social pressures, the lessons from Venice call for a renewed commitment to the principles of cultural sustainability. They challenge us to think beyond traditional conservation frameworks and embrace more integrated and forward-looking approaches to safeguarding our culture.

5. Discussion

The primary objective of this thesis is to explore the relationship between the global perspective on cultural sustainability, as articulated by UNESCO, and the local interpretation of this concept by municipalities managing UNESCO World Heritage sites at the urban scale. The first chapter examines the evolution of the definition of cultural sustainability, starting with an academic perspective highlighting the difficulties in establishing a universally shared definition. It then traces the development of this concept within UNESCO, an international agency that plays a pivotal role in both the creation of global policies and the implementation of cultural sustainability actions. This chapter underlines how the global understanding of cultural sustainability has evolved across theoretical discussions and practical frameworks, ultimately positioning cultural sustainability as an indispensable element of broader sustainability goals and the success of the sustainability concept itself.

Chapters two and three investigate how these abstract concepts are interpreted and adapted locally, specifically within the context of UNESCO sites in Amsterdam and Venice. In the two case studies presented, this research has illustrated how local governance practices evolve to adapt and align with the principles of UNESCO. These case studies aim to determine a critical link between the conceptual framework for cultural sustainability and its local applications. In both cases, it is crucial to consider the dynamics between international standards and guidelines on the one hand and local practices on the other.

By comparing the two cases, analysed through distinct methodologies and perspectives, this thesis highlights the complex dynamics between administrative realities at different scales – a supernational entity on the one side and local administration on the other. This comparative approach addresses the overarching research question: How has the concept of cultural sustainability evolved, and how is it applied and managed at the local level in urban heritage sites? The study examines the challenge of reconciling local contexts with their governance structures and policies, aiming to offer

a broader framework for understanding these dynamics. Positioned at the intersection of public policy studies and public administration, this research examines both strategic frameworks and practical implementations of cultural sustainability, a concept that proves to be complex both in theory and in practice.

5.1 Comparison

Through the analysis of Amsterdam and Venice, this study displays how local governments and stakeholders respond differently to UNESCO's principles, offering various modes of alignment with UNESCO policies. For the sake of consistency, it is important to remember that both cases, despite differing governance models and challenges, are still listed as UNESCO World Heritage sites. Neither of them experienced an explicit conflict that led to the abandonment or 'exit', as Hirshmann would call it, from UNESCO. Both cities, in fact, remain on the UNESCO World Heritage list and continue to uphold their status. In this section, two case studies were analysed and compared to address the central research question. This dual analysis serves two key purposes: first, to deepen our understanding of how cultural sustainability principles are applied and what cultural sustainability entails in practice, and second, to provide policymakers with tools and guidelines for governance in this domain.

The Amsterdam case study exemplifies a model of adaptive governance. Over the past decade, the city's public administration has gradually aligned its governance practices with UNESCO's principles through the integrated adaptation of these standards to local contexts, reflecting a community-based approach. Here, "community" refers to civil society actively articulating its needs and priorities to public authorities. This governance evolution also entailed a pivotal shift in the hierarchy of responsibilities for assessing and managing cultural sustainability. Amsterdam transitioned from a fragmented, borough-centric governance model to a professionalized system led by specialized public officers. These professionals act as mediators, bridging global frameworks with local needs to ensure implementation that is both nuanced and context-sensitive.

Concurrently, the city moved from legal harmonization to the development of standards, such as the Puccini Method. This approach simplified regulatory processes while maintaining flexibility to address site-specific challenges, avoiding deregulation but ensuring coherence. Rather than rigidly imposing global frameworks, Amsterdam employed processes of naming and translating UNESCO's principles to its unique local realities. The processes of naming and translating were instrumental in enabling Amsterdam to bridge the gap between global heritage frameworks and its local governance context. Through naming, the city identified and categorized its heritage assets in ways that resonated with local values and priorities, making abstract global principles more tangible. Translating, on the other hand, operationalized UNESCO's broad and sometimes ambiguous sustainability goals into actionable policies and standards that aligned with Amsterdam's specific socio-political, environmental, and historical contexts. This dual approach ensured that cultural sustainability efforts were not only theoretically robust but also practically relevant to the city's needs. By adopting these processes, Amsterdam introduced flexibility and innovation into its governance practices. Naming facilitated a localized definition of cultural sustainability, which allowed the city to adapt global principles while preserving its unique urban and cultural identity. Meanwhile, translating helped develop innovative tools like the Puccini Method, which standardized public space management while leaving room for site-specific adaptations. These tools balanced the need for consistent policy application with the flexibility required to address diverse challenges across Amsterdam's neighbourhoods.

Additionally, naming and translating were crucial in fostering collaboration and inclusivity among stakeholders. By clarifying UNESCO's principles and tailoring them to Amsterdam's context, the city engaged various actors – from policymakers and conservation experts to local communities – in the heritage governance process. This participatory approach ensured that cultural sustainability policies mirrored the lived experiences and needs of Amsterdam's residents, fostering community ownership and broader support for sustainability initiatives. To conclude, the experience of Amsterdam underscores the potential of adaptive governance and participatory processes to reconcile

global sustainability frameworks with local specificities. These findings illuminate not only the complexities of integrating cultural sustainability into urban heritage management but also the opportunities for crafting policies that are both globally aligned and locally meaningful.

Conversely, the case of Venice underscores the complexities and tensions inherent in aligning local governance with global sustainability frameworks. While the city formally acknowledges UNESCO's principles, its governance practices often prioritize economic imperatives and political expediency over substantive cultural preservation. This has resulted in a governance system characterized by ambiguity, fragmentation, and symbolic actions that fail to address the city's systemic challenges. The case of Venice exemplifies a contested scenario in which debates surrounding the site's status overshadow discussions about its sustainability. Although the local administration has managed to engage in a rhetorical battle with UNESCO, its practical efforts to integrate policies and align with the concept of cultural sustainability remain lacking. In Venice, alignment occurs primarily at the discursive level, manifesting as a rhetorical and often misleading use of public policies. However, this alignment does not extend to governance practices. A crucial factor distinguishing Venice from Amsterdam lies in the exclusion of key stakeholders – both epistemic communities, such as professionals, and residents, particularly those inhabiting the island of Venice – from decision-making processes. In this regard, Venice emerges as a cautionary case, demonstrating how governance strategies prioritising immediate economic and political interests over holistic sustainability can jeopardize the prospects for enduring cultural preservation. This examination underscores the pressing need to reconceptualize governance frameworks to confront the systemic challenges confronting World Heritage sites. It highlights the critical importance of inclusive, participatory, and contextually attuned approaches in effectively bridging the divide between global directives and local implementation.

In the case of Venice, tensions between UNESCO and the local administration persist, oscillating between periods of apparent calm and the resurgence of debates, conflicts, and threats. Despite a 'formal' or 'cosmetic' alignment of local policies with UNESCO's guidelines, true

integration of these principles has not materialized over the years, in stark contrast to the example of Amsterdam. This divergence highlights two fundamentally different processes of naming and translating, which can be applied to the case study of Venice. In Venice, naming is largely a matter of symbolic compliance. Here, naming occurs primarily at the formal level, where the city identifies and labels heritage assets in line with the framework of UNESCO. Yet, this process often lacks substantive depth and fails to translate into effective governance practices. Venice's naming thus emerges as a shallow exercise in identification, fulfilling the procedural requirements for World Heritage status without fostering genuine awareness or protection of its heritage. Unlike in Amsterdam, Venice's naming does not engage meaningfully with the city's unique cultural or environmental realities. Instead, the emphasis remains on satisfying external benchmarks to mitigate reputational risks rather than cultivating a deeper relationship with its heritage. What the naming process does reveal, through frame analysis conducted on the case, is the centrality of the tourism sector as the economic driver of Venice. This underscores a prioritization of tourism-centric narratives over the broader and more nuanced goals of cultural sustainability.

As a result, for the local administration, the only perceived pathway to making Venice sustainable lies in maximizing its economic profitability, primarily through tourism-related activities and infrastructure that affect and prioritize the interests of the port and airport sectors. Reducing sustainability to an economic dimension precludes the development of cultural sustainability policies as horizontal, integrated frameworks that engage both civil society and sectoral experts. This partial and narrow interpretation of sustainability stems from short-term perspectives promoted by a political system misaligned with the long-term objectives of heritage preservation. As a result, the potential for cultural sustainability to act as a comprehensive and inclusive strategy is undermined. Regarding the process of translating, it is possible to appreciate how the adaptation of UNESCO's guidelines in Venice is fragmented and ambiguous. The city struggles to effectively translate UNESCO's principles into actionable policies. Instead of operationalizing these principles, the city frequently employs symbolic measures (e.g., banning cruise ships from certain waterways) that do little to address

systemic sustainability challenges. Once again, this stems from the short-term and narrow perspective of the local administration. While Amsterdam managed to rethink its heritage preservation structures during the same years, Venice focused solely on formal rather than substantive integration aspects. This failure is largely due to the influence of neoliberal governance logics, which prioritize economic and political expediency over cultural and environmental sustainability. This results in fragmented actions that often conflict with the vision proposed by UNESCO. Translation efforts are further undermined by resistance from local authorities, who perceive the principles established by UNESCO as impractical or misaligned with their immediate priorities, such as maximizing tourism revenues. This resistance to UNESCO's oversight is another critical factor in understanding how the concept of cultural sustainability is applied and managed locally in urban heritage sites.

In conclusion, Amsterdam employed naming and translating as mechanisms to align global and local frameworks. In the case of Venice, instead, different dynamics are at play. In this case, it is possible to detect the same processes of naming and translating applied to a more granular level of analysis, where these processes manifest in the frame contestation phases between the two parties. In Venice, the framing processes aim not at resolving ambiguities but at sustaining them – deflecting criticism or avoiding accountability rather than fostering meaningful integration. The persistent ambiguity between the actors at play in Venice is a key factor preventing clarity in the contest and, consequently, hindering the implementation of robust cultural sustainability policies.

Going back to the core question – namely, the meaning of cultural sustainability and how this still-ambiguous concept can be applied – these two case studies raise a critical question: should the requests and definitions proposed by UNESCO be strictly followed, or should the priorities of local World Heritage sites take precedence? Evidently, pursuing external logic alone does not fulfil the principles of cultural sustainability, which, as discussed in the literature review, must originate from an attentive engagement with the local culture. In this regard, the two case studies reveal distinct approaches. Amsterdam has successfully integrated these external principles into its governance system while simultaneously adapting the standards of UNESCO to local needs, creating a cyclical

process of policy and governance definition and redefinition. This process has forged a synthesis of the two instances and relies heavily on context-sensitive and individual professional evaluations – which are a fragile yet successful evaluation system so far. To date, Amsterdam has not faced significant conflict with UNESCO, though such tensions could arise in the future if the city's localized adaptations – focused on projecting its heritage in a future of climate change and adaptation – clash with potential rigidity in UNESCO's evaluation criteria. Amsterdam, therefore, adopts a broad and transversal concept of cultural sustainability that intersects with social, environmental, and economic dimensions.

Venice, in contrast, exemplifies a contested and fragmented approach, marked by formal compliance with the principles of UNESCO but lacking meaningful practical integration. Nevertheless, one could argue that local priorities have been favoured over international frameworks, resulting in policies and governance structures ostensibly tailored to the site. However, such an argument fails to account for the complexities of the administrative landscape of Venice. A longstanding issue in Venetian governance lies in the unification, in 1926, of the administrative jurisdictions of the lagoon (Venice) and the mainland (Mestre and other municipalities), which represented a historical turning point that ended the autonomy of Venice. In fact, this new administrative jurisdiction exacerbated conflicts of interest and skewed representation. This unification created a disparity in which the voices of lagoon residents – significantly outnumbered by mainland inhabitants – are effectively marginalized. Mainland residents, whose concept of cultural sustainability often diverges from that of lagoon inhabitants, dominate decision-making processes, further silencing the concerns of those most closely connected to the cultural heritage of Venice.

In this regard, Amsterdam offers a more equitable model. Its decentralized system of administrative and political districts ensures effective representation for stakeholders, particularly civil society, within the central district. Venice, by contrast, lacks such mechanisms, leading to an internal conflict of priorities and interests, fracturing any attempts to develop effective strategies for safeguarding and sustaining the site. This internal conflict of priorities and interests is what balkanizes

the attempts to develop effective strategies for the preservation and sustainability of Venice as a heritage site. By failing to share a common understanding of cultural sustainability, the administrative unity of Venice exists only on a bureaucratic level but not on a value-based one.

The following table (Table 13) provides a summarized overview of the key insights and findings discussed in this thesis, highlighting the central themes, governance models, and implications for advancing cultural sustainability across different contexts. This table systematically compares the governance models, policy-making processes, stakeholder engagement, and approaches to naming and translating processes, sustainability and UNESCO principles in Amsterdam and Venice.

	Amsterdam	**Venice**
Governance Models	Adaptive governance. The transition from fragmented borough-level management to a professionalized governance system is led by specialized officers who mediate between global frameworks and local needs.	Fragmented, with a reliance on symbolic measures over substantive reforms. Governance prioritizes economic imperatives, leaving cultural sustainability as an underdeveloped policy area.
Policy Making	Standard creation. Policies are rooted in UNESCO's principles, operationalized into actionable standards adapted to local contexts.	Cosmetic policies. Policies are formalistic and often symbolic. These efforts lack depth and fail to address systemic sustainability challenges.
Stakeholder Engagement	Bottom-up approach. Promotes inclusivity and collaboration by engaging a wide range of stakeholders, including policymakers, conservation experts, and local communities.	Top-down approach. Excludes key stakeholders from decision-making processes. Local communities are not meaningfully engaged in sustainability policies.
Naming and Translating	Naming: Identifies and categorizes heritage assets in ways that resonate with local values, making UNESCO principles tangible and culturally relevant.	Naming: Primarily symbolic, fulfilling procedural requirements for UNESCO compliance without deeper cultural or environmental engagement.
	Translating: Operationalizes UNESCO's goals into practical, context-sensitive policies, ensuring cultural sustainability is both theoretically and practically robust.	Translating: Fragmented and ambiguous, hindered by resistance from local authorities and neoliberal governance priorities.
Focus on Sustainability	Frames cultural sustainability as a multidimensional concept, integrating community needs with global principles and ensuring long-term preservation.	Reduces sustainability to an economic dimension, focusing on tourism-driven activities that undermine broader cultural and environmental goals.
Approaches to UNESCO Principles	Alignment through localized definitions and innovative tools that balance global expectations with local realities.	Formal compliance with UNESCO principles without integration, reflecting resistance and short-term economic priorities.

Table 13 Overview of the comparing elements between Amsterdam and Venice

Overall, embedding cultural sustainability into governance is critical for translating regulations into actionable policies and that this successful integration requires moving beyond short-termism to address complex, systemic challenges. It also demands the protection of cultural diversity within a territory, which calls for recognition not only at the legislative level but also at the administrative and political levels of territorial units. This thesis contributes to expanding the current understanding of the concept of cultural sustainability and to unpacking the processes of its assimilation at the local level. The main contributions in this regard are three. The first contribution of this study is the identification of different models of governance and their impact on the local adaptation of UNESCO's principles. This work highlights the importance of adapting global heritage frameworks to local contexts in a way that respects the unique cultural, social, and political realities of each site. Effective governance models ensure that UNESCO's guidelines are not merely imposed from the outside, but rather are translated and integrated into local practices, making them relevant and flexible. This implies deeply engaging with naming and translating processes, tailoring them to the context, rather than enacting them only at the cosmetic level.

The second contribution stresses the emphasis on the role of stakeholder engagement in achieving cultural sustainability. In Amsterdam, the participatory process ensures that local communities and experts are actively involved in heritage governance, fostering a sense of ownership and broad support for sustainability initiatives. The inclusion of civil society and specialized professionals in the decision-making process is central to the development of policies that are both locally meaningful and globally aligned. In contrast, Venice's exclusion of key stakeholders, including local residents and heritage experts, undermines its capacity to develop effective and inclusive sustainability strategies. This divergence highlights the critical importance of stakeholder engagement in successfully implementing cultural sustainability.

Lastly, this work contributes to the previous literature by fostering the concept that cultural sustainability must be approached as a comprehensive, long-term framework that transcends short-term political and economic considerations. The case of Venice illustrates the risks of reducing

sustainability in economic terms, particularly through the prioritization of tourism and immediate revenue generation, which undermines long-term cultural preservation. Conversely, Amsterdam's holistic approach to cultural sustainability integrates social, environmental, and economic dimensions, ensuring that heritage management addresses not only immediate needs but also future challenges, such as climate change. This finding underscores the need for policies that go beyond short-term fixes and aim at a systemic, integrated approach to heritage conservation.

On the contribution to a broader understanding of cultural sustainability, this thesis emphasizes how culture plays a critical role in balancing ecological, social, and economic factors by integrating and harmonizing all aspects of sustainability. In this regard, culture should be considered both a foundation of human decision-making and a central concern in sustainable development, helping to blur the traditional boundaries between economic, social, and environmental dimensions. The doctoral research also highlights the importance of recognizing cultural sustainability across all policy domains, not just within cultural policy, and stresses the need for cross-sectoral policies that incorporate sustainability principles. Furthermore, the research addresses the historical exclusion of culture from dominant sustainability frameworks, which focus on ecological, social, and economic aspects, arguing that cultural factors must be incorporated to achieve long-term success. Finally, it advocates for a more pluralistic and structured understanding of culture, proposing guiding principles to help effectively integrate cultural dimensions into sustainability policies and practices.

5.2 Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis examines the concept of cultural sustainability in the context of UNESCO World Heritage urban sites, focusing on two case studies – Amsterdam and Venice. The structure of the work is organized into several key chapters that collectively explore the complexities of heritage management and the application of cultural sustainability principles at the local level.

The first part of the thesis introduces the research context, outlining the role of UNESCO and its functioning, with a particular emphasis on how heritage management operates at the local level.

The introductory sections provide an overview of UNESCO's principles and frameworks, establishing the foundation for understanding the relationship between global directives and local realities. Chapter 1 offers an in-depth exploration of cultural sustainability, tracing its antecedents, the establishment of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, and the recognition of intangible heritage. It also delves into the evolving academic and institutional definitions of cultural sustainability, setting the stage for case studies.

Chapters 3 and 4 present the detailed case studies of Amsterdam and Venice, respectively. In Chapter 3, the focus is on the approach to cultural sustainability in the Dutch context, where the governance of Amsterdam has integrated the principles of UNESCO with local needs through adaptive governance and community-based engagement. Chapter 4, instead, examines the fragmented and contested debate between Venice City authorities and the UN international agency. Despite formal compliance, the governance practices in Venice often prioritize short-term economic interests over long-term cultural sustainability, leading to a disconnection between policy intentions and practical outcomes. The chapter emphasizes the tensions between local priorities and the global frameworks of UNESCO, particularly in the context of tourism-driven economic pressures.

The final chapter of this thesis offers a comparative discussion of the two cities, contrasting their approaches to cultural sustainability. It highlights how an adaptive governance model provides a more cohesive and context-sensitive approach while fragmented strategies struggle to reconcile local economic imperatives with international sustainability goals. The comparison underscores the importance of aligning governance structures with cultural values and local contexts, as well as the necessity of stakeholder engagement and long-term vision in achieving cultural sustainability.

The main contribution of this work lies in its comparative analysis of two distinct approaches to managing cultural sustainability within UNESCO World Heritage urban sites. By examining how each city integrates principles into local governance, this thesis provides valuable insights into the complexities of translating global sustainability frameworks into locally relevant policies. The findings suggest that a more inclusive, participatory, and context-sensitive approach is crucial for

reconciling the global objectives of UNESCO with the realities of local urban heritage sites, offering critical implications for future policy-making not in heritage management but, overall, for future sustainable urban development.

This thesis opens the debate on the future challenges of cultural sustainability and urban public management, particularly within UNESCO World Heritage cities. A key comparative insight from Amsterdam and Venice is the role of governance structures in shaping the effectiveness and legitimacy of sustainability strategies. The decentralized model of Amsterdam and its active inclusion of stakeholders – particularly local residents – appear to foster greater institutional resilience and adaptability. In contrast, the fragmented and often centralized governance in Venice hampers coordination, limits responsiveness, and contributes to a disconnect between sustainability goals and actual public management outcomes. One of the most critical takeaways from this comparison is the importance of democratic representation in heritage governance. The presence of strong mechanisms for citizen participation and the meaningful inclusion of residents in decision-making processes seem to be essential for ensuring both legitimacy and efficiency in managing World Heritage sites. This lesson holds particular relevance for other cities facing similar pressures, such as Florence. Like Venice, Florence grapples with limited local autonomy in managing its UNESCO-designated areas while simultaneously confronting intense global challenges like overtourism and the depopulation of its historic centre.

To address these shared issues, the thesis advocates for increased peer learning among World Heritage cities. Establishing a more formalized and inclusive network of urban World Heritage sites – where cities can compare governance models, share best practices, and reflect on common challenges – could significantly enhance collective capacity. While some initiatives already exist, they are often limited in scope. At present, participation in such forums is typically restricted to World Heritage site managers, with little involvement from senior municipal staff or elected officials. This exclusion reinforces the gap between those responsible for heritage protection and those who shape broader urban policy and governance. As a result, cultural sustainability risks being siloed, with

minimal integration into comprehensive city strategies. Bridging this institutional divide requires creating platforms where heritage professionals, long-term administrators, and political leaders can engage in sustained dialogue. Only through such cross-sectoral and multi-level collaboration can heritage management evolve into a more integrated and impactful dimension of urban sustainability.

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Acronyms

BMA	Municipal Bureau for Monuments and Archaeology
CWM	External Appearance and Historic Buildings Committee
ICOMOS	International Council on Monuments and Sites
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
MoSE	MOdulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico
NPM	New Public Management
OUV	Outstanding Universal Value
SGD	Sustainable Development Goal
SoC	State of Conservation
UCLG	United Cities and Local Governments
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
V&L	Venice and its Lagoon
WH	World Heritage
WHB	World Heritage Bureau

Annexes

Annex 1 – Decision 40 COM 7B.53 (2016)

52. Venice and its lagoon (Italy) (C 394)

Decision: 40 COM 7B.52

The World Heritage Committee,

1. Having examined Document WHC/16/40.COM/7B.Add,
2. Recalling Decision **38 COM 7B.27**, adopted at its 38th session (Doha, 2014),
3. Expresses its extreme concern that the combination of previous developments, ongoing transformations and proposed projects within the property which are threatening serious deterioration of the eco and cultural systems of the Lagoon and irreversible changes to the overall relationship between the City and its Lagoon, as well as the loss of architectural and town-planning coherence of the historic city, all of which would lead to substantive and irreversible loss of authenticity and integrity;
4. Considers that the property requires an immediate improvement to the planning tools available through the creation of:
   a) an integrated strategy for all on-going and planned developments within the property,
   b) a three-dimensional morphological model and
   c) a sustainable tourism strategy,

   all of which should be reflected in an updated Management Plan for the property; this revised planning approach should also be founded on a shared vision of authorities and stakeholders which affords priority to sustaining the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the property and its landscape and seascape setting;
5. Reiterates its request to the State Party to enforce speed limits and regulate the number and type of boats in the Lagoon and in the canals;
6. Also reiterates its request to the State Party to adopt, as a matter of urgency, a legal document introducing prohibition of the largest ships and tankers to enter the Lagoon and requests the State Party to put in place all necessary strategic, planning and management frameworks to this end;
7. Also requests the State Party to halt all new projects within the property, prior to the mid-term assessment of the Management Plan, and the submission of details of proposed developments, together with the Heritage Impact Assessment (HIAs) and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), to the World Heritage Centre, in conformity with Paragraph 172 of the *Operational Guidelines*, for review by the Advisory Bodies;
8. Endorses the recommendations of the 2015 mission and further requests the State Party to fully implement these recommendations;
9. Requests furthermore the State Party to revise the proposed buffer zone for the property in line with the ICOMOS technical review and submit it to the World Heritage Centre as a minor boundary modification, by **1 December 2016**, for examination by the Committee at its 41st session in 2017;
10. Finally requests that the State Party implement all urgent measures highlighted in the mission report and submit to the World Heritage Committee a detailed report on the state of conservation of the property and the implementation of the above, by **1 February 2017** for examination by the World Heritage Committee at its 41st session in 2017, **with a view, if no substantial progress is accomplished by the State Party until then, to consider inscribing the property on the List of the World Heritage in Danger.**

Annex 2 – Map of the Big Ships entering the Venetian Lagoon (Source: Irpi Media from Venice Port Authority)

The map illustrates the current route and access of Big Ships in the Venetian Lagoon. Following the 2021 ban, only vessels under 25,000 tons are permitted to pass through the city centre via San Marco and Giudecca to reach the Marina (yellow line). For ships exceeding 25,000 tons, entry into the lagoon is still allowed, with docking available at Porto Marghera or Chioggia (red lines).