From one story to many

Advancing participatory approaches in strategic heritage interpretation planning

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The Challenge

Heritage interpretation is increasingly expected to move beyond expert-led communication and become a more dialogic, community-engaged practice. Yet while participatory approaches are slowly entering front-end interpretive services (e.g. tours, media, and educational activities) strategic interpretation processes – such as interpretation plans and masterplans – remain largely expert-driven. This gap is especially significant in complex heritage landscapes, where multiple communities, memories and values intersect, and where interpretation can either reinforce exclusion or foster dialogue, belonging and shared responsibility.

The Project

EMPATHS (EMpowering landscapes with Participatory Approaches To Heritage interpretation Skills) is an Erasmus+ project developing a methodological framework and training resources for participatory heritage interpretation at a strategic level. It supports heritage professionals and institutions in the co-creation of meanings, narratives and interpretive decisions with communities and stakeholders.

Heritage interpretation is...
"A meaning-making process through communication, participation and experience."
(UNESCO Whipic)

The Phases

1. Research

We studied existing participatory practices (14 cases, 27 experts globally) in heritage interpretation and related sectors to identify strengths, gaps and transferable models.

2. Development

We developed a new methodological framework for participatory meaning-making in heritage interpretation: principles, processes, tools.

3. Training

We are launching a new training programme to build competences in facilitation, participation, conflict sensitivity and collaborative process design for the co-creation of heritage meanings.

4. Piloting

Technical and pilot partners will test the approach in contexts with different scales, communities and forms of heritage (archaeological, intangible, natural):

- Campi Flegrei Archaeological Park, Italy
- Ethnological Museum of Thrace, Greece
- Karawanken/Karavanke UNESCO Global Geopark, Austria/Slovenia.



Conclusions

If participation is to become meaningful in heritage interpretation, it must be embedded not only in interpretive outputs, but also in the strategic processes through which heritage meanings, narratives, and priorities are defined. In this respect, participatory interpretation is not simply a methodological refinement. It is a way of making heritage work more relevant, inclusive, and responsive to contemporary social challenges.

Let's continue the conversation!

Read and endorse the EMPATHS Manifesto

Explore project resources on empaths-project.eu

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