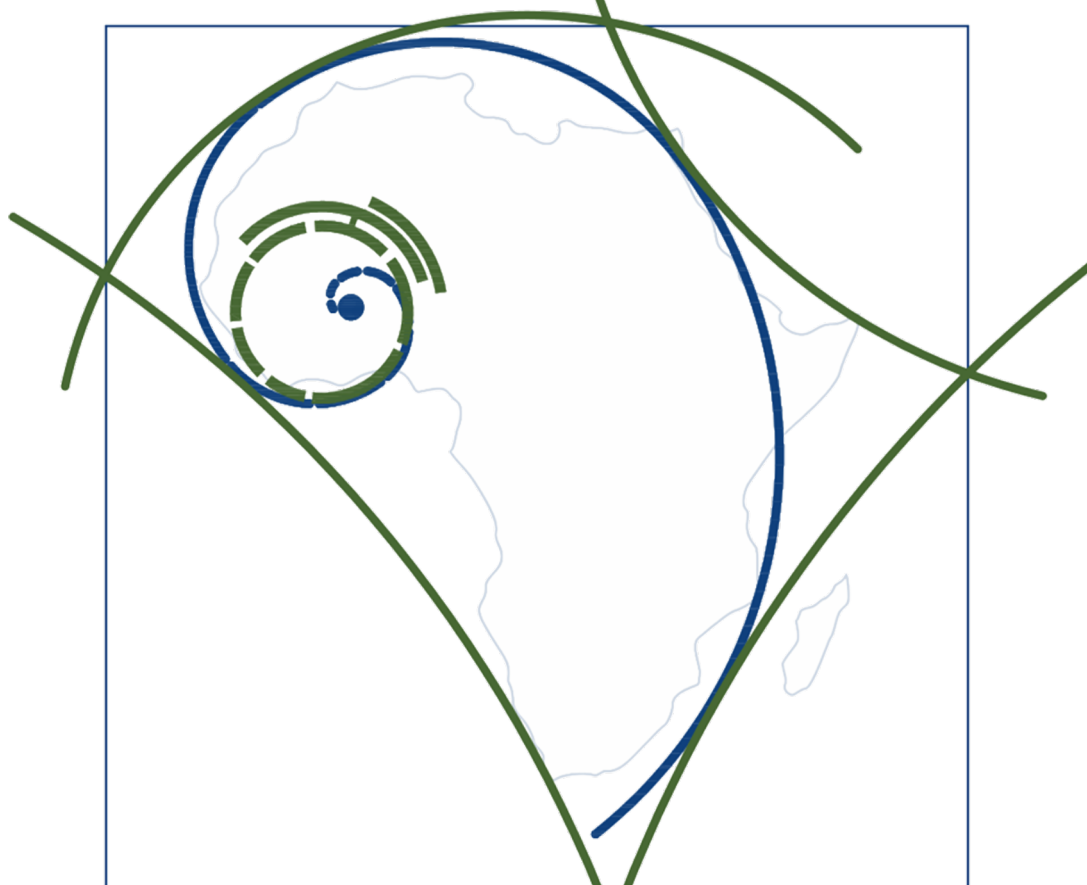


ARCHITECTURE HERITAGE and DESIGN

Carmine Gambardella

XXIV INTERNATIONAL FORUM

Le Vie dei
Mercanti



**WORLD HERITAGE | AFRICA LESS IS MORE
FUTURE AS AN ETERNAL PRESENT**

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Le Vie dei.
Mercanti

XXIV INTERNATIONAL FORUM

22-23 May 2026 Napoli - Capri



GANGEMI EDITORE®
SPA
INTERNATIONAL

Carmine Gambardella
WORLD HERITAGE and FOOD TO FEED
WORLD HERITAGE and FUTURE AS AN ETERNAL PRESENT
Le Vie dei Mercanti
XXIV International Forum



Proprietà letteraria riservata

Gangemi Editore spa

Via Giulia 142, Roma

www.gangemieditore.it

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ISBN 978-88-492-5577-5

ISSN (online): 3035-5141

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Scholars has been invited to submit researches on theoretical and methodological aspects related to the impact of natural ecological disasters and armed conflicts on Cultural Heritage, and show real applications and experiences carried out on this themes. Based on blind peer review, abstracts has been accepted, conditionally accepted, or rejected. Authors of accepted and conditionally accepted papers has been invited to submit full papers. These has been again peer-reviewed and selected for the oral session and publication, or only for the publication in the conference proceedings.

Conference report

300 abstracts and 400 authors from 20 countries:

Albania, Algeria, Australia, Belgium, Canada, China, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Iran, Italy, Japan, Morocco, Mexico, Portugal, Romania, Republic of Guinea, Serbia, South Africa, Spain, Turkey, Uganda, United Kingdom, United State of America.

**From the XXIII FORUM WORLD HERITAGE and FOOD TO FEED
to the XXIV FORUM:
WORLD HERITAGE and AFRICA: LESS IS MORE
WORLD HERITAGE and FUTURE AS AN ETERNAL PRESENT**

The **XXIV International Forum “Le Vie dei Mercanti”** continues the path of previous editions by presenting World Heritage as a living organism able to connect memory, identity, and future. After the reflections on “*World Heritage and Food to Feed*,” the 2026 edition broadens its focus to Africa and to the idea of the future as a dynamic continuity of the present.

The theme **World Heritage and Africa: Less is More** recognizes Africa as the cradle of humanity and a laboratory of sustainability. Its cultural landscapes and vernacular architectures demonstrate how the integration of environment, traditional techniques, and community life can generate resilient, low-impact solutions. “Less is More” becomes an ethical and design paradigm: enhancement of local resources, natural materials, essential construction processes, circular economy, and community participation. Heritage protection is thus understood as an active process of social and economic regeneration, based on light settlement models attentive to biodiversity and the memory of places.

The theme **World Heritage and Future as an Eternal Present** interprets heritage as a dynamic system, not only a legacy of the past but a living structure shaping the future. Architecture and planning act as mediators between memory and innovation, integrating digital technologies, advanced education, and knowledge dissemination. Sustainability embraces public health, quality of life, and environmental responsibility within an inclusive global vision.

The logo of the XXIV International Forum synthesizes these values: Africa as a universal reference, the golden ratio as harmony between nature and culture, and the cell as a symbol of life and continuity. Heritage thus emerges as a balance between history and design, tradition and innovation.

Prof. Carmine Gambardella
General Chair XXIV Forum ‘World Heritage and Africa: Less is More’
and ‘World Heritage and Future as an Eternal Present’
President and CEO of the Benecon University Consortium
UNESCO Chair on Landscape, Cultural Heritage
and Territorial Governance

**Dal XXIII FORUM WORLD HERITAGE and FOOD TO FEED
al XXIV FORUM:
WORLD HERITAGE and AFRICA: LESS IS MORE
WORLD HERITAGE and FUTURE AS AN ETERNAL PRESENT**

Il **XXIV Forum Internazionale “Le Vie dei Mercanti”** prosegue il percorso delle edizioni precedenti ponendo il patrimonio mondiale come organismo vivente, capace di connettere memoria, identità e futuro. Dopo la riflessione su “*World Heritage and Food to Feed*”, l’edizione 2026 amplia lo sguardo al ruolo dell’Africa e al futuro inteso come continuità dinamica del presente.

Il tema **World Heritage and Africa: Less is More** riconosce l’Africa come culla dell’umanità e laboratorio di sostenibilità. I suoi paesaggi culturali e le architetture vernacolari mostrano come l’integrazione tra ambiente, tecniche tradizionali e vita comunitaria generi soluzioni resilienti e a basso impatto. “Less is More” diventa paradigma etico e progettuale: valorizzazione delle risorse locali, uso di materiali naturali, processi costruttivi essenziali, economia circolare e partecipazione delle comunità. La tutela del patrimonio si configura così come processo attivo di rigenerazione sociale ed economica, fondato su modelli insediativi leggeri, attenti alla biodiversità e alla memoria dei luoghi.

Il tema **World Heritage and Future as an Eternal Present** interpreta il patrimonio come sistema dinamico, non solo eredità del passato ma struttura viva che orienta il futuro. Architettura e pianificazione diventano strumenti di mediazione tra memoria e innovazione, integrando tecnologie digitali, formazione avanzata e diffusione della conoscenza. La sostenibilità comprende salute pubblica, qualità della vita e responsabilità ambientale, in una visione inclusiva e globale.

Il logo del XXIV Forum Internazionale sintetizza tali valori: l’Africa come riferimento universale, la sezione aurea quale principio di armonia tra natura e cultura, la cellula come simbolo di vita e continuità. Il patrimonio emerge così come equilibrio tra storia e progetto, tradizione e innovazione.

Prof. Carmine Gambardella
General Chair XXIV Forum ‘World Heritage and Africa: Less is More’
and ‘World Heritage and Future as an Eternal Present’
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Community Participation and the Regeneration of Heritage Public Spaces

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of public space from an open arena of spontaneous encounter to a regulated and often privatized domain shaped by economic interests and institutional control. Drawing on contemporary theoretical perspectives, it frames public space as a dynamic social construct where memory, practices, and power relations intersect. Community participation emerges as a crucial tool to counter exclusionary processes and promote inclusive regeneration. The research focuses on three emblematic Berlin case studies—Tempelhofer Feld, Mauerpark, and Park am Gleisdreieck—analyzing how participatory governance, adaptive design, and informal uses contribute to the protection and enhancement of heritage-rich sites. Through an integrated methodological approach combining spatial, economic, and social analysis, the study demonstrates that active local involvement fosters resilient, sustainable public spaces capable of adapting to ongoing urban and cultural transformations.

Keywords: community participation, cultural heritage, public spaces, regeneration

1. Introduction

Over time, public space has undergone profound transformations, shifting from an open realm of spontaneous encounter and free interaction to a dimension increasingly shaped by processes of regulation, privatization, and economic valorisation. Today, it is configured as a dynamic field in which memory, social practices, and contemporary transformations intersect, generating unstable balances between collective use, institutional control, and market interests. Within this framework, the participation of local communities assumes a decisive role, as it affects not only the quality of the urban experience but also the capacity of places to preserve and regenerate their cultural and identity-related values [1–3].

The theoretical debate has emphasized that public space is neither neutral nor immutable, but rather a social construct continuously redefined by the practices and conflicts that traverse it. Henri Lefebvre [4] describes it as the realm of unpredictability and non-functional encounter, where relationships and presences give meaning to space. However, this vision must contend with processes that discipline and spectacularize the public realm, as observed by Bauman [5], who argues that the private sphere has progressively colonized the public one, transforming it into a stage for display and consumption.

Within this tension, community participation emerges as a tool capable of counteracting exclusionary dynamics and promoting forms of regeneration grounded in the co-production of space. Crawford [6] highlights how incremental interventions and everyday practices can transform places without erasing their memory, while Habermas [7] recognizes public space as an essential dimension for the formation of collective opinion. Similarly, Holston [8] and Innerarity [9] stress the need to rethink the boundaries between public and private in light of increasing social complexity, valuing informal practices and the plurality of perspectives. In this regard, Arendt [10] identifies public space as the domain of political action and the construction of a shared world.

The evolution of public space thus reflects profound transformations within urban society and places collective responsibility for the protection and regeneration of cultural heritage at the forefront. Building upon these premises, this study—developed within the research projects L.O.V.E. Sapienza, *Livable, enjOyable and attractiVE spaces for the community, University and Urban Regeneration: Redesigning Neglected Spaces and Routes with Sapienza as a Driver*, NARRATES (architectural and urban regeneration research line), and T.A.S.T.E., *TrAnsforming public Spaces to foster healThy Eating at Sapienza*, funded by Sapienza University of Rome and coordinated by the author—examines three emblematic cases in Berlin, adopted as

a paradigmatic urban laboratory. The aim is to investigate how participatory processes, inclusive governance models, and informal uses can contribute to the regeneration of heritage-rich spaces. Through an integrated methodological approach, the research seeks to demonstrate how the active involvement of local communities not only strengthens heritage protection but also fosters the creation of resilient public spaces capable of adapting over time to urban and social transformations.

Berlin represents a paradigmatic case for understanding the transformations of public space in the contemporary city. Its urban trajectory is deeply intertwined with the historical events that shaped the twentieth century, from the division between East and West to the process of reunification, which triggered a complex reconfiguration of public spaces both physically and symbolically [11,12]. In this sense, the German capital has progressively established itself as a true urban laboratory in which different interpretations of public space coexist: from the valorisation of historical memory to practices of collective reappropriation, as well as tendencies toward the privatization and commercialization of strategic areas [13–16]. Among the most emblematic examples of this evolution are Tempelhofer Feld, Mauerpark, and Park am Gleisdreieck, which will be described along with the methodology adopted for their analysis.

2. The method

The study of the three public spaces was conducted through the application of a structured methodology [13–15] aimed at investigating the design, managerial, and social dimensions that define their functioning and urban significance. The approach is based on the integrated collection, organization, and interpretation of both quantitative and qualitative data, with particular attention to processes of spatial conception and transformation, governance models, and the concrete modalities of use by different user groups.

A first field of inquiry concerns spatial configuration and the degree of integration within the urban fabric. This dimension is examined by considering geographic location, spatial extent, and the morphological and functional relationships between the site and its surrounding context. These elements make it possible to assess the urban relevance of the intervention, its role within the broader city structure, and its capacity to generate both physical and symbolic connections.

A second key area addresses governance and management frameworks, through the identification of the institutions and stakeholders involved in the design, implementation, and maintenance of the public space. This analysis clarifies the relative weight of public authorities and potential private actors in decision-making and operational processes, highlighting collaborative or conflictual dynamics that may influence the space's evolution over time.

Particular importance is also attributed to the economic dimension, examined through the analysis of funding sources, the scale of investments, and the allocation of resources among public and private entities. Economic data allow for the evaluation not only of the project's financial sustainability but also of its potential transferability and replicability in other urban contexts.

Urban planning frameworks constitute an additional interpretative parameter, helping to determine whether the public space forms part of a broader regeneration strategy or represents a more isolated intervention. This step is essential to understanding the coherence of the project with territorial policies and existing planning instruments.

The analysis further extends to functions and patterns of use, comparing intended programmatic objectives with the uses that have actually emerged over time. The capacity of a public space to accommodate diverse activities and attract heterogeneous users is considered a significant indicator of vitality, adaptability, and overall success.

Actual patterns of use are also examined through the observation of events, cultural initiatives, and presence dynamics, including digital traces left on social media platforms. Although online visibility cannot be regarded as a comprehensive measure of quality, it provides valuable insight into the degree of recognizability and the construction of a shared identity within the contemporary public sphere.

Finally, the methodology incorporates the analysis of documentary, bibliographic, and web-based sources in order to consolidate the interpretative framework. The integration of these tools enables the development of a comprehensive reading that connects spatial, economic, and social dimensions, offering operational guidance for the design and management of future public spaces. The approach is conceived as replicable and adaptable to diverse urban contexts, capable of articulating the complex relationships between space, practices of use, and urban policies.

3. The case studies

Tempelhofer Feld represents one of the most emblematic cases of urban regeneration in Europe and constitutes an extraordinary example of the conversion of a former airport infrastructure into a vast multifunctional public space. Covering 386 hectares, it is among the largest urban parks in the world, even exceeding New York's Central Park in size. Managed by Grün Berlin GmbH, the area was inaugurated as a public park in 2010 following a €60 million investment funded by the Berlin Senate, aimed at ensuring environmental sustainability and full accessibility [18].

The site is deeply intertwined with the history of aviation: the first recorded flight dates back to 1909 with Orville Wright, while in the 1930s the airport—expanded under the design of architect Ernst Sagebiel—became one of the largest in Europe. After its definitive closure in 2008, the Berlin Senate launched an international competition for the site's transformation, won by the Scottish firm Gross Max, which proposed the concept of a vast “contemporary prairie for urban cowboys.” The project preserved the existing airport structures, renaturalized large portions of land, and introduced new landscape features, including an artificial hill approximately 60 meters high topped by a sculpture inspired by Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire*.

Today, Tempelhofer Feld functions as an open and highly flexible public space, characterized by minimal programming that encourages spontaneous and temporary uses. The six-kilometre circular runway is widely used by cyclists, skaters, and runners, while designated areas accommodate picnics and barbecues. Biodiversity is a central component of the project: more than 300 varieties of plants and fruit trees have been introduced, transforming the site into a habitat for rare plant and animal species. Management is grounded in a participatory approach that allows citizens to propose activities and initiatives, including unicycle and circus schools, juggling spaces, bicycle workshops, and chess clubs. Between 2015 and 2020, the area also hosted a round of the Formula E World Championship, with the track laid out along the former airport terminal. Its strong presence on social media—over 11,460 likes on the official Facebook page and more than 27,000 posts tagged #tempelhoferfeld—confirms its symbolic role within contemporary Berlin. Tempelhofer Feld demonstrates how urban regeneration can effectively intertwine historical memory, environmental sustainability, and open, adaptable forms of use over time.

Mauerpark [19] constitutes another emblematic example of public space emerging from the transformation of an area profoundly marked, both physically and symbolically, by Berlin's division. Extending over approximately 80,000 square meters, the park was initiated in 1993, immediately after the fall of the Wall, and remains an evolving project reflecting the ongoing urban and social transformations of the German capital. The redevelopment was initially promoted by the Grün Berlin Foundation and later managed by the Grün Berlin Stiftung, while routine maintenance is carried out by Grün Berlin GmbH. The project received 4.5 million Deutsche Marks from the Allianz Environmental Foundation, complemented by an additional 3 million provided by the State of Berlin.

Mauerpark is distinguished by a participatory management model aimed at connecting diverse user groups and balancing recreational functions, environmental protection, and historical memory. The design strategy preserved pre-existing activities, such as the well-known flea market, bars, and cafés, while introducing new facilities compatible with the site's character. A defining feature is the intercultural garden with edible plants and fruit trees, intentionally left unfenced to promote inclusion and accessibility. The park hosts sports activities, cultural events, and public gatherings; significant interventions include a small pond, a campsite, and a miniature architectural ruin conceived as a playful environment for younger users. A pedestrian and cycling path cross the park, linking it to the Berlin–Usedom long-distance cycle route and strengthening sustainable mobility networks.

Over time, Mauerpark has become a major hub for informal cultural expression, renowned for its open-air Sunday karaoke and the presence of street performers who animate the space, making it a symbol of Berlin's creative identity. Although past criticisms concerned maintenance issues, recent cleaning and management efforts have improved public perception. Its wide social media visibility—over 31,470 Facebook likes and more than 29,000 posts tagged #mauerpark—further confirms its central place in Berlin's urban imagination. Nevertheless, the project's full completion remains debated: tensions have emerged between real estate development interests and the preservation of public space, with residents of Gleimviertel and Oderberger Straße opposing plans for a major road. Mauerpark thus exemplifies how public space can function as an arena of negotiation, where economic interests, environmental protection, and the right to the city intersect.

Park am Gleisdreieck [20] represents a further exemplary case of urban regeneration accompanied by an intense participatory process within the Berlin context. Covering approximately 400,000 square meters, the park emerged from the transformation of a disused railway area once characterized by a dense network of tracks forming a strategic urban infrastructure. Developed between 2007 and 2013, the project involved the Berlin Department for Urban Development, Grün Berlin GmbH, and Atelier Loidl Landscape Architecture, supported by specialized technical consultants for hydraulic and infrastructural systems. A total investment of €15 million enabled the conversion of an obsolete infrastructure into a structured system of multifunctional public spaces distinguished by high standards of environmental sustainability and social inclusion.

The design approach emphasized the enhancement of existing traces, preserving railway elements and spontaneous vegetation that had developed over time. This strategy integrated the post-industrial landscape with a contemporary green design capable of responding to diverse user needs. The park thus assumes an intergenerational character, offering sports facilities, cycling and pedestrian paths, and areas dedicated to relaxation and social interaction. Citizen involvement was significant from the earliest stages: residents had already proposed transforming the site into green space in the 1970s, but only in

1997, after reunification, was it possible to formalize an agreement with VIVICO, the landowner. In 2006, a two-phase design competition was launched, both phases awarded to Atelier Loidl.

The park is organized into two main sections—Ostpark, inaugurated in 2011, and Westpark, completed in 2013—connected by the former north–south railway line, now a symbolic and physical element of continuity. Particular attention was given to preserving ruderal flora and original railway structures such as signals and tracks, reinforcing the site's identity and cultural value. Today, Park am Gleisdreieck serves as a major urban reference point, offering a wide range of functions and integrating seamlessly into Berlin's green infrastructure network, with connections to Potsdamer Platz, the government district, and the Schöneberger Südgelände nature reserve. The park also operates as a laboratory for innovative forms of public space use, where recreational, sporting, and cultural practices coexist. Notable interventions include the Rosenduftgarten Interkultura, a garden curated by a local community and distinguished by its rich chromatic and olfactory diversity. Adjacent areas dedicated to spontaneous nature provide children with opportunities for environmental learning through play and direct interaction with natural elements.

The park's extensive use is reflected in its popularity on social media, with over 2,503 likes on its official Facebook page and more than 3,410 posts tagged #gleisdreieckpark. The project has received several awards, including the Berlin Architecture Award 2013, the German Urban Design Award 2014, and the German Landscape Architecture Award 2015, confirming its significance within the field of contemporary urban design. Following its completion in 2013, Park am Gleisdreieck strengthened the city's green infrastructure system by expanding the network of interconnected public spaces. With its 26 hectares, it represents a virtuous example of urban regeneration, combining the recovery of industrial heritage with the creation of an inclusive and sustainable urban ecosystem.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of the three Berlin case studies highlights how community participation constitutes a decisive factor in the protection and regeneration of heritage-rich public spaces. Tempelhofer Feld, Mauerpark, and Park am Gleisdreieck, despite their morphological, historical, and managerial differences, share a common matrix: the capacity of local communities to exert a tangible influence on design choices, patterns of use, and governance arrangements. In all three cases, regeneration has extended beyond a purely physical transformation of space, activating social dynamics capable of strengthening identity, sense of belonging, and collective responsibility.

Tempelhofer Feld demonstrates how programmatic flexibility and openness to spontaneous uses can foster widespread appropriation, transforming a former airport infrastructure into a shared landscape where historical memory and contemporary practices coexist. Mauerpark, with its inherently conflictual and negotiated character, illustrates how public space can become an arena for confronting divergent interests, while simultaneously serving as a site for the collective re-elaboration of urban memory. Park am Gleisdreieck, in turn, attests to the effectiveness of structured participatory processes capable of integrating industrial heritage recovery, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion.

The comparison reveals that participation cannot be reduced to mere consultation; rather, it entails active and continuous involvement across the phases of conception, implementation, and management. Such engagement contributes to the creation of more resilient spaces, capable of adapting over time to social, economic, and cultural transformations [17]. Moreover, the presence of hybrid governance models—where public institutions, foundations, and citizens collaborate—appears essential in ensuring a balance between heritage protection and innovation in use.

Another significant aspect concerns the symbolic dimension: in all cases examined, regeneration processes have enhanced pre-existing historical traces, avoiding radical erasure and fostering narrative continuity between past and present. This confirms that active heritage conservation does not imply immobility; instead, it may evolve into dynamic processes grounded in the co-production of space.

In conclusion, the Berlin experience suggests that the regeneration of heritage-rich public spaces proves most effective when local communities are recognized as central actors rather than passive recipients of urban policies. Participation, when embedded within inclusive and sustainable governance strategies, emerges as a key lever for shaping public spaces capable of reconciling memory, innovation, and adaptability, thereby contributing to the development of more equitable, resilient, and culturally aware cities.

Acknowledgements

The study was developed in the framework of: L.O.V.E. Sapienza, *Livable, enjOyable and attractiVE spaces for the community*; *University and Urban Regeneration: Redesigning Neglected Spaces and Routes with Sapienza as a Driver*, NARRATES (architectural and urban

regeneration research line); and T.A.S.T.E., *TrAnsforming public Spaces to foster healThy Eating at Sapienza*, and Sapienza Horizon Award, Sapienza University of Rome.

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