

IV CONVEGNO INTERNAZIONALE E INTERDISCIPLINARE  
SU IMMAGINI E IMMAGINAZIONE

4th INTERNATIONAL AND INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE  
ON IMAGES AND IMAGINATION

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A cura di / Edited by  
Stefano Brusaporci, Pamela Maiezza, Adriana Marra  
Ilaria Trizio, Francesca Savini, Alessandra Tata

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Proceedings of 4th International and Interdisciplinary  
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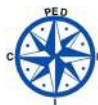
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IMAGIN(G)  
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Atti del Convegno | Proceedings



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**IMAGIN(G)  
HERITAGE**







# Rediscovering Stratified Urban Context by Visual Pathways: the Esquiline of Rome

## **Abstract**

Visual communication allows promoting territories to rediscover urban contexts. The stratification and hybridization of cultures, societies, and palimpsests, can be highlighted by visual paths, which offer possible keys of interpretation. The article suggests two visual paths created during a CIVIS Summer School to read the Esquiline neighbourhood in Rome, a crossroads of cultures and transformations. The results allow evaluating critically the visual description of complex urban contexts.

## **Keywords**

Visual imprints, Urban stratification, Communication, Esquiline, Memory.



## INTRODUCTION

The Cultural Heritage idea has expanded its contents and definitions, starting from the 2003 UNESCO Convention<sup>1</sup>. It involves many subjects, widening shared spaces at different scales: building, city, and territory (Ippoliti & Albisinni, 2017). According to this new vision, tangible and intangible Cultural Heritage plays a crucial role in the progress of societies because it promotes dialogue between cultures, respect for identity and diversity, and a feeling of belonging to a community of values (Faro Convention, 2005<sup>2</sup>; European Cultural Heritage Strategy for the 21st century, 2017<sup>3</sup>). At the same time, it is also a decisive key factor for social and economic progress, an invaluable resource for education, employment, tourism, and sustainable development. The Cultural Heritage Counts for Europe (CHCfE) project provided 10 key findings, demonstrating the wide-ranging benefits of investing in Europe's cultural heritage<sup>4</sup>.

In this scenario, it becomes necessary to involve communities in designing the future, starting from the cultural resources of the territories, aiming at their valorization. To valorize "*implies the will to affirm the communicative, symbolic, and social role of the object of valorization itself. Therefore, valorization is a cultural and communicative action within a community that recognizes itself in a system of values*" (Salvarani, 2005). According to this approach, Cultural Heritage can be valorized starting from its intentional communication to understand the assets by people who become active participants in constructing contents and meanings (Hooper-Greenhill, 2003).

The first step requires identifying the recipient of the communication, the audience/visitor, recognizing them with their own cultural background (Bodo, 2003) and proceed to a cultural mediation to bridge the gaps between the perceived contents and its meanings. The role of visualisation becomes essential in this process, since mediation starts from the awareness that Cultural Heritage artefacts are constantly exposed to the public gaze (Pomian, 1987). Besides, they are objects that can be interpreted and understood. This happens from the senses, which mainly depends on "the nonverbal language of objects and observable phenomena," that is, on visual language (Cameron, 1968). Such communication and mediation require an environment that preserves a deep relationship with the audience by acting on cognitive-rational and affective-emotional aspects, offering active cultural experiences. The recipient/interlocutor becomes a dynamic subject who bears ideas, experiences, and values.

The article represents the synthesis of an educational experience during the Summer School "*Multiculturalism and Cultural Heritage. Rediscovering, telling, and sharing the visual imprints and fragments of the Metamorphosis*" supported by the European network CIVIS. The research proposes some results about visual itineraries suggested in the Esquiline neighbourhood in Rome, starting from the exploration of the new languages of contemporaneity. They deepen the interdisciplinary relations between images and words, ensuring the cultural heritage experience is accessible, participatory, engaging, and inclusive.

## THE SUBJECT AREA: THE ESQUILINE NEIGHBOURHOOD

The Esquiline is one of the historic districts of Rome, standing on the highest of the city's seven hills. Despite being placed in the centre of Rome, showing ancient urbanisation, it has always been considered a border area. Therefore, even nowadays, it is unknown not only to tourists but also to Roman citizens (Carbone & Di Sandro, 2020). On the other hand, it preserves crucial presences of history of the millenary history of the Eternal City and the more recent one of Italy. During its history, the district was always considered a shady area

until the significant development of Rome. In the Republican period, it was only partially surrounded by the Servian Walls, while just outside urban underclass lived in miserable conditions. Under Emperor Augustus, wealthy patricians built public structures and villas in the area, but the district was still miasmatic and unhealthy. During the first Christian period, many important buildings of Christianity arose in the Esquiline<sup>5</sup>. Despite these constructions, the reputation of a cursed place was confirmed even in the Middle Ages. During the Renaissance, the area was also at the centre of the renovation initiated by Pope Sixto V. From the end of the sixteenth century, the district was considered the garden of Rome. Here, the aristocrats built their suburban residences surrounded by greenery. From 1870, when Rome became the capital of Italy, the Esquiline was readapted to the new role it had just assumed (Severino & Carmelo, 2019 ; Severino, 2019). It was in the centre of an impressive urban-renewal project, with the construction of representative buildings, housing for government and administration people, and broad avenues and squares. During the King Umberto I period, several buildings, such as the Termini station, were built, demonstrating the vital role of the area. However, the Esquiline was also the theatre of the darkest events in the history of Italy, reminded by the Liberation Museum, which in the 1930s was the German embassy in Rome. During the Nazi-Fascist occupation, it became a place of imprisonment and torture by the SS unit. From the 1930s to the second post-war period, the small and middle working class densely inhabited the neighbourhood. The social life revolved mainly around Piazza Vittorio, attracted by the trades that took place daily between the market stalls and in the shops below the arcades. Starting from the 1950s the neighbourhood depopulated and returned to being the refuge of the "last," described by several neorealist films. Then, it began to repopulate. First Italian immigrants arrived and, more recently, emigrants from all over the world: Bangladesh, Philippines, Romania, China, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Somalia, India, Ivory Coast, and other places. The most recent metamorphosis of the Esquiline is heading toward a new dynamic equilibrium condition (Banini, 2021). It is highlighted daily by the experimentation of integration paths of cultural diversity and the multiculturalism experience of a plural and stratified social culture. Therefore, the Esquiline represents a particular multi-layered reality. It has known how to reconfigure itself throughout history, readapting to growth and physical transformation, migration, and globalisation, marked by various built spaces and the people living in the area. This situation is too complex to be described from a single point of view, but requires a set of possible gazes, suggesting an imaginable but tangible city, which holds memory and future together. Therefore, it is still necessary to find pertinent communication paths that can tell and represent the city, to appreciate a city, its culture and the heritage related to its cultural identity and individual experience. It can be rediscovered by images, stories, and video sequences, mixing past and present, monumental memories and recent history along paths and itineraries in the city.

#### VISUAL PATHWAYS (CIVIS PROJECT)

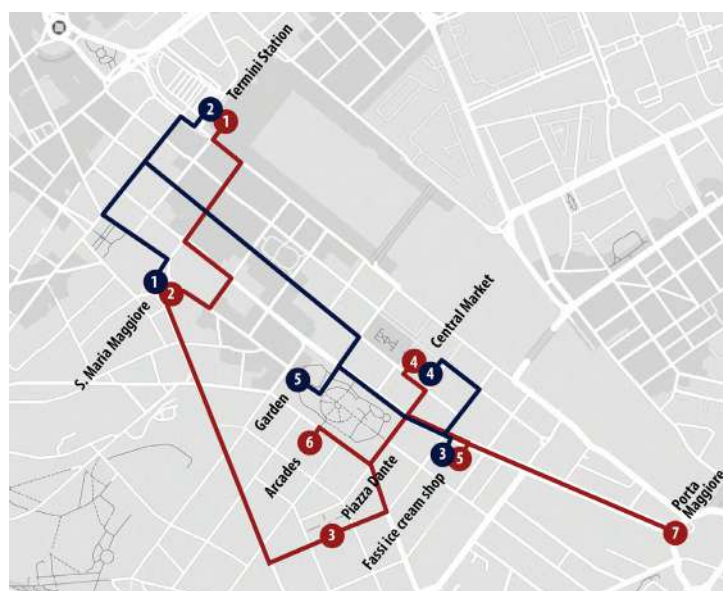
In this context is framed the experience held at the Summer School "*Multiculturalism and Cultural Heritage. Rediscovering, telling, and sharing the visual imprints and fragments of the Metamorphosis*", the third sub-topic educational event inside the CIVIS project "*Metamorphosis in a changing world: the role of Culture and Heritage in the society transformation.*" The edition held in Rome from June 27 to July 8, 2022, was devoted to multiculturalism and hybrid language, a mixture of visual and verbal language. Through this theme, different societies, cultures, and corresponding heritage were analysed.

During the Summer School, the first objective was to acquaint students with the best practices of integrating visual and verbal language into Cultural Heritage in the Roman area, a particular crossroads of European and non-European identities in the centuries until today. Next, students were involved in a workshop, experimenting applications between visual and verbal language, drawing etymological and visual repertoires on selected themes related to the identity of places concerning multiculturalism. Different storytelling techniques were applied with digital technologies and new media. The ultimate goal of the Summer School was to educate younger people on Cultural Heritage and, above all, the Heritage of cities, thus stimulating younger interlocutors' ideas and proposals about future cities by considering possible contributions from the past. Working groups were involved in identifying different elements that characterise the cultural stratification of the Esquiline area in three different ways: hybridization, resilience, and stratification. Each group analysed the neighbourhood and defined visual and cultural pathways to bring out this particular specificity. Two of these aspects are presented in the article.

### STRATIFICATION

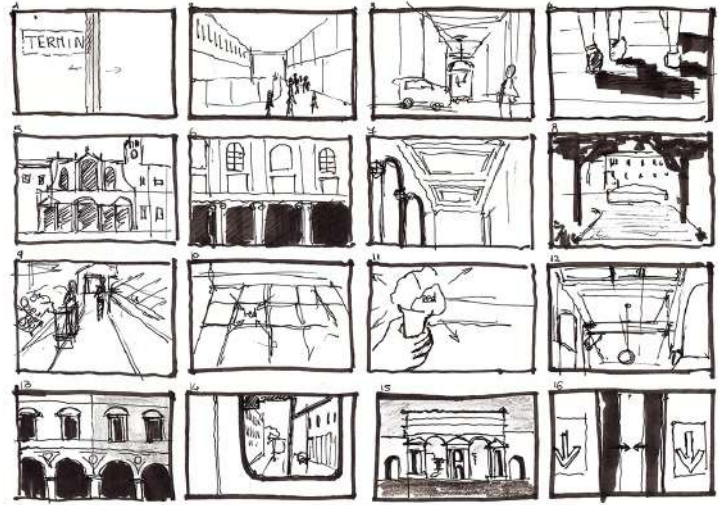
The objective of the study conducted in the Esquiline area was to identify and understand its peculiarities in terms of stratification and produce a short video that could effectively communicate this phenomenon. The area represents the nerve centre of coexistence among different ethnic minorities in Rome, making it a melting pot of cultures.

We wanted to communicate the diverse essence of this part of the city without using a narrator. The primary aim was to showcase the neighbourhood not only through visual aspects, but also highlighting its intrinsic and intangible qualities, using ambient sounds and noises recorded on-site as a soundtrack to accompany the viewer on a short yet intense journey. In the video we featured some representative places of the theme of stratification (from cultural, architectural, historic, and social point of view). The storyline follows the theme of a journey, beginning with the opening of the



**Fig. 1** - Stratification path (in red); Hybridization path (in blue) (author: Giulia Flenghi).

**Fig. 2 -** Sketched storyboard for planning the shots (author: Noemi Tomasella).



underground doors in the bustling Termini Station. The video, shot from a first-person point of view, takes viewers on a journey through historical landmarks and popular hangouts in the neighbourhood, revealing its diverse facets. As a result, the video presents a juxtaposition of different layers/realities, showcasing the multifaceted nature of the area.

We believe it was crucial to emphasise the sensory experience of the neighbourhood by analysing its characteristics in terms of images, sounds, scents, flavours, and textures. Our experience highlighted the importance of considering not only tangible values but also the historical, architectural, social, and cultural complexity. These elements are essential for understanding the unique qualities of a place and its role as a bearer of memories and a testament of the passage of time and people.

## HYBRIDIZATION

The analysis on the hybridisation in Esquilino had the Central Market as a focal investigation point and approached the following aspects: identifying the spatial/visible traces of multiculturalism in the neighbourhood, inquiring with individuals on how they perceive these traces and investigating the transformations in identity occurring both at the level of Esquilino and the local communities. The aim was to explore the degree to which the presence of multiple cultures and identities trigger hybridisation processes.

The investigation catalogued architectural traces of the urban palimpsest, symbols such as storefront signages and also compiled live discussions [including walking interviews] with traders from the Market. While people working there included both Italians and foreigners, one Italian respondent argued that Esquilino lacks multiculturalism because there isn't a proper flow of ideas between these different communities. Another respondent claimed these foreign cultures never integrated themselves, while interviewed foreigners argued that Italy "feels like home" and that they enjoy living in Rome.

The work showcased that the Esquilino Central Market is a symbol of local identities and that, through a function that goes beyond trade (multi-ethnic social events are also organised there) it also serves as both a form of heritage in itself and as a carrier of heritage values, leading to a meta-cultural urban heritage which can be integrated in the "deep cities" approach<sup>6</sup>.

**Fig. 3 -** Conducting fieldwork in the Esquilino Central Market, July 1st, 2022; Julie Delaunois (Belgium) is discussing with an Italian vendor against the backdrop of a stand with halal meat (author: Miruna Găman).



## CONCLUSIONS

The article proposes a reflection on the use of images and videos as a tool for the construction of visual itineraries that enhance the complex cultural stratification of urban realities. Specifically, the methodology of analysis considers the study of the Esquilino neighbourhood in Rome, an area rich in culture and cultural intersections that have developed over time. Starting from a teaching experience conducted within a Summer School promoted by the European network CIVIS, two different paths are compared, highlighting some specific aspects that characterise the complexity of the neighbourhood. The results define the starting point for an in-depth study that considers the critical comparison between the visual approaches and the results achieved to define the possible process of visual enhancement of complex urban realities.

## NOTE

1. UNESCO (2003). Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003. [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=13179&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13179&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html).
2. Faro Convention (2005). Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, Faro, 27/10/2005, <https://rm.coe.int/1680083746>. In this framework, objects and places are important for the meanings and uses that people attribute to them and for the values they represent.
3. Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the European Cultural Heritage Strategy for the 21st century (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 22 February 2017 at the 1278th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies), <https://rm.coe.int/16806f6a03>.
4. <http://blogs.encatc.org/culturalheritagecountsforeurope/outcomes/>
5. Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, San Pietro in Vincoli, Santa Pudenziana, Santa Maria Maggiore, Santa Prassede, San Martino ai Monti, Sant'Antonio di Padua.
6. The "deep cities" approach refers to a city's temporal layers, which, when approached within the study of the urban space's social and spatial aspects, can foster sustainable urban development (Fouseki, Gutyormsen & Swensen, 2020).

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