Civic Engagement and Cultural Heritage:*
Lessons from the Herculane Project

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Introduction

Cultural heritage is globally recognized and is supported by international organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (Rodzi et al. 2013).As defined by UNESCO (Institute for Statistics 2009), cultural heritage includes artefacts, monuments, a group of buildings and sites, museums that have a diversity of values including symbolic, historic, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological, scientific and social significance.

The significance of cultural heritage in society is emphasized by the United Nations (UN 2016) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11, which aims to safeguard cultural heritage and promote participatory planning. This goal highlights the need for greater efforts to protect the world's cultural and natural heritage. This aspect has made cultural heritage an important dimension of the more complex concept of sustainable development, as well as the specific implications it can have at the local level (Duxbury et al. 2016). Thus, cultural heritage is acknowledged as a crucial element for sustainable local development, contributing to the identity of territories and the cultural diversity of local communities (Gravagnuolo et al. 2021).

Moreover, the SDGs include indicators to address the percentage of cities with an established framework for direct civil society participation in urban planning and governance, operating consistently and democratically. This highlights the importance of allowing individuals to engage in matters that affect their locality, should they wish to do so (Mc Candlish–Mc Pherson 2020).

Within the European Union, cultural heritage is defined as a collective good of societal significance and mutual benefit. This entails the engaged participation of various stakeholders within multi-dimensional and participatory frameworks of public initiatives. These stakeholders include public authorities, private entities, civil society organizations, NGOs, the volunteer sector, and interested individuals. They play active roles in decision-making, planning, preservation, and protection of cultural goods (Žuvela et al. 2023).

The importance of conserving cultural heritage is acknowledged by the international (UNESCO, 2020), European (EC no. 116/2009; EU no. 2019/880), and national legislation (The Romanian Law of Preserving Cultural Monuments, 2001). Financial resources from public bodies are allocated to the most significant heritage buildings and sites, while smaller and less significant sites may receive less funding attention from institutions (Gravagnuolo et al. 2021).

In Romania, historic monuments are protected by law, regardless of their ownership or state of preservation. The protection of historic monuments is a crucial aspect of a sustainable future, based on social, tourism, urban, and spatial strategies at the national and local levels. The State should guarantee and ensure the protection of historical monuments through public administration bodies.

In many cases, public administration authorities are responsible for safeguarding heritage, but, for assorted reasons, often fail to provide sufficient financial and management resources for heritage sites. This is also the case for the town of Băile Herculane/Herculane Baths spa resort, one of the oldest thermal baths in Romania and Europe. Many of the historic buildings are poorly preserved, and some are badly degraded to the point of collapse, as is the cease of the Băile Neptun/Neptun Baths building.

This paper aims to examine the role of civic engagement in safeguarding cultural heritage goods in cases where public authorities have failed to do so. It is anticipated that non-governmental and non-profit organizations will assume a role in addressing societal needs where the state and other institutions lack the necessary resources to do so (Albu–Zakota 2022). The Herculane Project, initiated by a Romanian non-governmental organization (NGO) – Locus Association, provides valuable insights into the interplay between civil society, public administration authorities, and the preservation of cultural monuments.

To achieve this, we will start with the hypothesis that civic engagement is a vital mechanism for safeguarding cultural goods in the face of challenges to preserving cultural heritage, such as funding constraints and limited governmental intervention.

To accomplish the research objectives, we will seek to address the following research inquiries:

I. How does civic engagement, as demonstrated by the Herculane Project in Romania, affect the preservation of cultural heritage goods in the absence of adequate governmental support?

II. What insights can be gained from this case study to guide efforts to enhance civic initiatives in cultural heritage preservation worldwide?

Methodological Framework

This article aims to discuss civic engagement and cultural heritage from a theoretical and conceptual perspective followed by a study regarding the Herculane Project. The article intends to be narrative (Martin 2014), it follows a clear and logical structure, adhering to conventional academic formatting and style guides.

A qualitative approach was employed (Klein–Myers 1999), using interpretive description (Thorne 2014) and a review of secondary literature to answer the research questions.

The investigation material comprises social media representations, online websites such as the Herculane Project website, articles, and public information with references to the situation of cultural goods belonging to the town of Băile Herculane. The research methods used are content analysis, document analysis, and case study.

Cultural Heritage and Civic Action

Cultural heritage is a crucial element of civilization, encompassing symbolic significance and contributing to the cultural memory and identity of both individual nations and humanity. It enhances the lives of people universally, fostering unity through collective memory, shared knowledge, and the advancement of civilization. The use of heritage occurs in different arenas and takes on significance as a vehicle for political, cultural, and entrepreneurial purposes, as well as educational and emancipator (Nilson–Thorell 2018).

According to the Heritage Convention (UNESCO 1972) the cultural heritage is composed of:

− *monuments:* architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings, and combinations of features, that are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art, or science;

− *groups of buildings:* groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity, or their place in the landscape, are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art, or science.

– *sites:* works of man or the combined works of nature and man, and areas including archaeological sites which are of outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological, or anthropological point of view.

Historic buildings and cities (as in the case of Băile Herculane) are valuable assets that can produce resources and generate economic benefits when managed efficiently. By attracting visitors, entrepreneurs, and businesses in search of distinctive places, the enhancement of urban heritage can generate economic impact in the form of real estate appreciation, job creation, and income growth in the activities related to heritage services (Bertacchini 2020).

Considering these aspects, it can be affirmed that safeguarding cultural heritage is a crucial responsibility of the state and public administration authorities. This involves fulfilling three major requirements: acknowledging, supporting, and protecting cultural heritage *(Figure 1)* (Florea et al., 2020).

Figure 1. Requirements for Safeguarding Cultural Heritage

Source: Florea et al. 2020.

These requirements can be achieved through diverse actions such as conservation, renovation, and restoration. Although heritage conservation primarily focuses on safeguarding or restoring the unique physical characteristics of historic urban centers, their cultural and economic significance can be fully realized through renovation, revitalization, and adapting their functional purposes to accommodate shifting economic and social dynamics (Bertacchini 2020).

Protecting cultural heritage goods can be a challenging task for national or local authorities due to budget constraints, legal limitations, and administrative capacity. Civil society organizations can provide valuable expertise, grassroots legitimacy, and the ability to mobilize public support (Haque–Baker 2006).

Starting from the assumption that the term civil society refers to a society of citizens (Polgár 2023), we consider that civil society and cultural heritage are linked

through their mutual roles in preserving and promoting societal values, identity, and cohesion. Thus, in this case, civil society's civic actions, such as advocating for the preservation and protection of cultural heritage by mobilizing public support, raising awareness, and influencing policy decisions (Rigney 2016), serve as custodians of cultural heritage goods.

Thus, in the following section, we will examine the case study of Băile Heruclane to determine whether civil society and civic actions played a role in advocating for the preservation and protection of cultural heritage.

Lessons from the Herculane Project

Short information about Băile Herculane

Băile Herculane/ Herculane Baths is today a Romanian town resort in the Caraş-Severin county. Băile Herculane spa was first documented in 153 AD during the Roman period. It still bears the Latin inscription "Ad Aquas Herculis Sacras Ad Mediam."[1] It was subsequently ruled by the Hungarians, Austrians, and after 1918 by Romanians. In the 19th century, cultural and leisure functions were added to the main function of the medical treatment center, leading to an unprecedented development. The settlement is visited by notable figures of the time, such as Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria, who described the Herculane Baths as "the most beautiful resort on the continent", and his wife, Empress Elizabeth of Austria, who owned property in the town - Villa Elisabeta (Town hall of Băile Herculane website).[2]

The Băile Herculane resort has existed for two millennia, thanks to the effectiveness of its thermal springs and its picturesque location in a valley sheltered by mountains. The area is currently part of the Natura 2000 protected site.

Considering its historical heritage, Băile Herculane can be viewed as an open-air museum due to its extensive architectural legacy. According to Law no. 442/2001(on the protection of historical monuments), the place's identity is defined by a set of 74 objectives listed in the National Heritage Institute's 2010 List of Historical Monuments.[3] These objectives include 14 archaeological sites, 55 architectural ensembles and monuments, and 5 public monuments in the form of statues.

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1 "At the holy waters of Hercules near Mehadia".

2 Natura 2000 is a network of protected areas that covers Europe's most valuable and threatened species and habitats. It is the largest coordinated network of protected areas globally, extending across all 27 EU Member States, both on land and at sea.

3 In accordance with Law no. 422/2001 on the protection of historical monuments, these monuments are an essential part of the national cultural heritage and are protected by law. They are classified into two groups: *category A* – historical monuments of national and universal value, and *category B* – historical monuments representative of the local cultural heritage.

Among these, we mention:

– Băile Neptun/Neptun Baths (also known as the Austrian Imperial Baths) together with the Iron Bridge, heritage building category A (see *Figure 2.*).

Figure 2. Băile Neptun/ Neptun Baths and the iron bridge over Cerna River
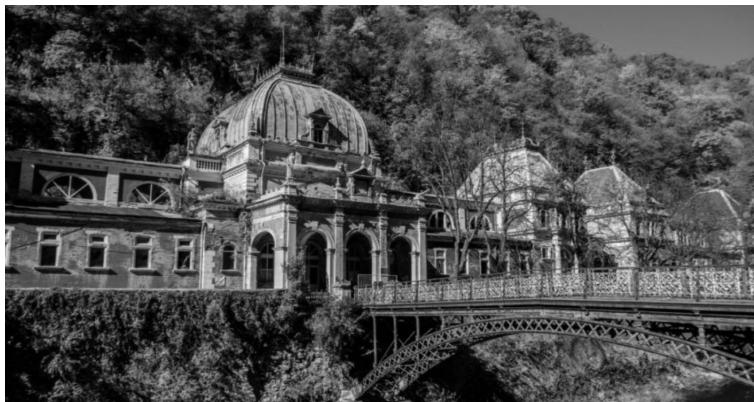
Source: Google Images accessed 27.03.2024.

– the stone bridge in the historic center, heritage category A (see *Figure 3.*).

*Figure 3. The stone bridge with the covered corridor
(before and after the renovation from 2023*)
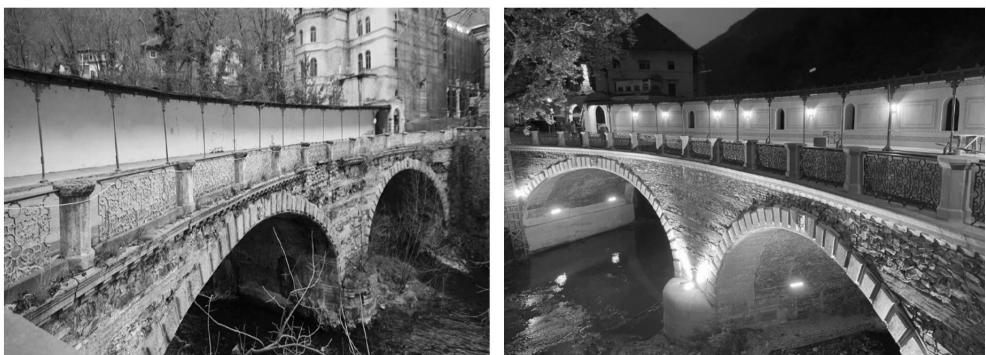
Source: Google Images accessed 27.03.2024.

– the Casino complex, heritage building category A (see *Figure 4.*).

Figure 4. The Casino complexes.

Source: Google Images accessed 27.03.2024.

During Romania's transition from communism to democracy, attempts to privatize the Băile Herculane resort were unsuccessful. It is important to note that 35 people are currently indicted and the trial is still pending. In addition, a substantial number of heritage goods have deteriorated due to inadequate investments. BăileNeptun is one of the heritage buildings that is in an advanced stage of degradation. In some parts, it is even in a pre-collapse stage due to water infiltrations and poor interventions. In 2019, two structural walls and a roof collapsed due to a lack of funding and legal issues (See *Figure 5.*). Băile Neptun are considered the symbol of the Herculane Baths due to their special eclectic architecture and historic legacy.

Figure 5. Băile Neptun degradation situation

Source: Google Images accessed 27.03.2024.

The situation of the Neptun Baths is also influenced by a unique legal situation, which is not the focus of our study but will be researched in the future. In summary, the building is currently the public property of the Băile Herculane town due to an exchange contract between a private owner and the town.

Under contract no. 2754/2012, only the building was transferred to Băile Herculane town, while the land on which it stands remains in private ownership. This is due to ongoing legal disputes that have yet to be resolved by the court. The current legal situation prevents local public administration authorities from applying for European or national financing programs. Therefore, the only work that can be conducted at present is to secure and remove the public danger label from this building. Civil society has understood this situation and is standing by through the Herculane Project.

The Herculane Project

The Herculane Project was initiated by the Locus Association, a Romanian NGO established in 2017 by a group of young architectural students and graduates.

Currently, the *Locus* Association serves as the driving force behind the civic activities of the Herculane Project, and the NGO is comprised of a diverse team of individuals from a range of professional backgrounds. The team includes individuals with diverse professional backgrounds, such as architecture students and graduates, economists, IT specialists, journalists, marketing, and communication experts, collaborating artists, engineers, historians, and others. The team exhibits diversity not only in terms of professional expertise but also in terms of age and geographical location. Members range in age from 18 to pensioners/retirees, and hail from cities such as Timişoara, Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, and London, as well as from the local community of Herculane Baths (HerculaneProject.ro 2024).

This diversity serves to illustrate the broad appeal and significance of Băile Herculane to various demographic groups, both nationally and internationally.

This is further evidenced by the NGO's status as a member of the European organization Europa Nostra[4] The association's first and main objective is to preserve the historic thermal complex, Băile Neptun/Neptune Baths, through the Herculane Project platform *(Figure 6.).*

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4 Europa Nostra was established on 29 November 1963 in Paris. It is recognized as the largest and most representative heritage network in Europe, covering 40 countries. Europa Nostra maintains close relations with the European Union, the Council of Europe, UNESCO, and other international bodies (https://www.europanostra.org/, accessed: 24.03.2024).

Figure 6. The Herculane Project's official web platform

Source: https://herculaneproject.ro/en/, accessed: 28.03.2024

Today the Herculane Project extends its goals and, as described by their plat-form (herculaneproject.ro) has two dimensions: the reactivation of Băile Neptun and the social and cultural reactivation of Băile Herculane.

One of the main steps taken to preserve this heritage building was the develop-ment of a technical project by a team of specialists and volunteers on behalf of the Locus Association.

Additionally, a public–civil partnership was concluded, which can be defined as an alliance of public entities (public authority, public administration, public institu-tions, public agencies, public enterprises, etc.) and civil actors (associations, organi-zations, alliances, networks, etc.) sharing rights and responsibilities in governing and managing cultural heritage goods (Žuvela 2023).

Thus, a Collaboration Protocol was concluded with Băile Herculane Town Hall and the Locus Association, which was approved by the Local Council decision no. 24/2018. The protocol aims to ensure the security, rehabilitation, and enhancement of the building.

According to legal provisions, all the actions taken by the Association are re-versible and temporary. They aim to prevent degradation caused by meteoric wa-ter infiltrations, unstable elements collapsing, and human-made damage such as theft or breaking of ornamental elements.

At the same time, the NGO launched a public campaign on the internet, social media platforms, and mass media to collect funds through donations and sponsor-ships.[5] The campaign was promoted with the motto" *Get involved! The aim was to implement urgent measures described in the ethnic project to save Neptune Baths, a historical monument of national interest that was in a state of pre-collapse. Donate and help us save Neptune Baths."* The funds raised through the public campaign helped the Project undertake important activities to save the historical building.

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5 See, for more detailes: https://herculaneproject.ro/en/media/, accessed: 29. 03. 2024.

These activities included supporting elements in a stage of collapse, roofing work, supporting vaults and ceilings, protecting ornamental elements, and sanitizing the building.

The efforts of the civic initiative culminated in 2022 when Băile Neptun was included among the 7 Most Endangered sites,[6] selected from the 12 sites short-listed by a panel of international experts (https://7mostendangered.eu/sites_list/ selected-2022/, accessed: 28. 03. 2024).

The second dimension of the project aims to reactivate the social and cultural aspects of Băile Herculane resort through a series of civic and educational actions. These actions aim to stimulate social and cultural development and support cultural diversity.

In 2018, one of the first civic actions was the organization of a summer school in Băile Herculane called the *Architecture Bath.* The program included theoretical activities and field trips focused on restoration and historical urban studies, to discover techniques for enhancing architecture in the Austrian Baroque style. Through the action of *HerculTURA* – the NGO initiated, organized, and guided architectural tours through Băile Herculane. The *Herculane Baths Cultural* Site proposed a hybrid of cultural events that would combine the fascination of the architectural heritage of the Băile Herculane with visual arts. All these civic actions mobilized public support. In 2023, the event *Heritage First!* was organized, the first biennial dedicated to cultural heritage in Romania, with the participation of over 100 people, including representatives from institutions such as the Ministry of Culture, the National Institute for Cultural Heritage, and the Order of Romanian Architects (Herculane Project.ro 2024).

Discussion and conclusion

This paper aims to examine the relationship between civic engagement and cultural heritage. According to Gravagnuolo et al. (2021), civic organizations play a crucial role in saving cultural heritage from abandonment through civic action. They serve as platforms for individuals to come together, mobilize resources, and effect change. This is supported by literature, videos, websites, and practical experience reports. To emphasize this link, the research focused on the case study of the Herculane Project.

Considering the ambiguous legal situation of the historical spa complex Băile Neptun, and the legal and financial limitations faced by local public authorities, the research hypothesis was validated through analysis of the study.

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6 The 7 Most Endangered Programme is a civil society campaign aimed at preserving Europe's endangered heritage. It raises awareness, provides independent technical assessments, proposes recommendations for action, and seeks to rally support to save the selected endangered sites. Being on the 7 Most Endangered List often serves as a catalyst for action and an incentive for mobilizing the necessary public or private support.

Civic action has been demonstrated to be an effective instrument for influencing heritage preservation efforts. This is evidenced by initiatives such as the Herculane Project in Romania, which was led by an NGO. In this project, the NGO collaborated closely with individuals, public authorities, private entities, and international partners to mobilize resources and expertise for the restoration and revitalization of heritage sites in the region.

About the first research question, we observed from the case study that the Locus Association conducted several civic actions, as highlighted in the table below.

Table 1. Dimensions of civic engagement for cultural heritage in Băile Herculane

HERCULANE PROJECT	
Cultural heritage	**Civic actions**
Băile Neptun	– media campaign of promotion and sensibilization "regarding" the tragic situation of the historical building – conclusion of a public–civil partnership with Băile Herculane Town Hall – collection of funds through donations and sponsor ships – technical analyses and emergency interventions for protecting and preventing the collapse of some parts of the building – listing the heritage spa complex among the 7 Most Endangered sites
Băile Herculane resort	– encouraging social and cultural growth – fostering cultural variety and utilizing culture as a means of communication among diverse groups – backing cultural creation and diverse forms of expression – establishing an educational structure to cultivate future professionals in the domain – mass– media promotion of Băile Herculane as a cultural destination and therapeutic traditions

Source: Author elaboration.

The Locus Association proposes that Băile Neptun maintain its current function as a medical spa, while also integrating wellness, commercial, and social functions. Additionally, the NGO has worked to develop and sustain the cultural heritage goods sphere by mobilizing public support, raising awareness, and influencing policy decisions. For instance, the Town Hall of Băile Herculane mobilized to access a European Union program to finance the rehabilitation of the Stone Bridge (as shown in *Figure 2.)*, which is one of the few heritage monuments with no legal issues.

Regarding the initial research question, it is also possible to identify an important lesson that can be derived from the Herculane Project. This highlights innovative approaches to heritage management. Through adaptive reuse and creative interventions, the project seeks to revitalize historic buildings, such as the Băile Neptun spa complex, and spaces, such as the town of Băile Herculane. This is achieved by making them economically viable while preserving their cultural significance.

Regarding the second research question, the case study shows that heritage's cultural and social value makes it significant for many people, regardless of its property regime (Borchi 2020). It is important to note that civil society organizations emphasize civic engagement, philanthropy, and commitment to public issues. The analysis suggests that collective actions could compensate for several vulnerabilities related to national legislation and regulations, but not replace them. This is due to their ability to mobilize public support for the finalization of emergency interventions.

Consequently, another generalizable lesson could be derived, namely, that community engagement has a significant impact on heritage preservation. In this case, the Locus Association acts as an NGO, engaging local communities in the initiative. By collaborating with residents, businesses, and other stakeholders, the Herculane Project fosters a sense of ownership and pride in preserving the cultural heritage of Băile Herculane.

For Băile Herculane, the Locus Association's civic engagement through the Herculane Project has attracted visitors and entrepreneurs seeking unique destinations. This is supported by data from the National Statistical Institute (2023), which shows that the resort is the top destination in Caraş-Severin County, attracting almost two-thirds of all tourists.

The study presents a model for the use of material heritage in cultural tourism at national and international levels. According to Bertacchini (2020), civic initiatives focused on heritage conservation and cultural atmosphere could potentially drive sustainable development. This highlights a perspective for future research, which we consider exploring in the future.

In conclusion, the Herculane Project serves as a case study of significant value in the field of heritage conservation and civic initiatives. The" Locus" Association demonstrates effective lessons for preserving and promoting cultural heritage in the modern context, through community engagement, public-civil partnerships, innovative approaches, and cultural tourism development.

Finally, at the end of this work, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the research. As the paper is primarily based on empirical insights, the limitation of this research lies in its subjective interpretation of results. This is a common challenge in qualitative research, which requires a clear distinction between objective and subjective evaluations.

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