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The regaining of public spaces to enhance the historic urban landscape

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Abstract

Open spaces in the urban landscapes suffer from deterioration caused by man that leads to two major outcomes: on one side they are abandoned because of newer contemporary needs, on the other hand they tend to be "cannibalized" in the attempt to satisfy our society. This has caused a progressive retraction of urban open spaces that have become residual spaces with no shape and no name.
This course of crisis has damaged the identity of places and this is more acute in historic urban landscapes that are recognised as cultural heritage and world heritage. The historic urban landscape approach suggested by UNESCO recognises public spaces' importance for society and promotes the acknowledgement of public spaces and their dynamism aiming to the integration of preservation, social development and economic targets.
To understand how "historic urban landscapes" are taking care of their public spaces, a few Management Plans of UNESCO's World Heritage cities have been compared. Only Italian UNESCO sites with an "urban complex" characterisation have been considered, this means a limited part of a city with homogenous characteristics from a spatial, historic and cultural point of view. We have focused our attention on the specific interventions for the management of open spaces, in order to identify the major targets and their executive tools, projects and actions.
In the light of the above-mentioned analyses, we propose some strategies to fight the decline of public spaces (streets, squares, gardens, etc.) and to enhance these spaces with great attention, trying to improve their fruition and comfort according to their historic and cultural values.
The need to identify design strategies to enhance public spaces within the historic urban landscape is included in the research and test activities carried out in the UNESCO site of Mantova and Sabbioneta. This site is an excellent area of applicability because of its urban shape, molded in years by the Gonzaga family. Together with the UNESCO Mantova e Sabbioneta office, we have involved citizens in the requalification design to activate regaining process and test the applicability of our analyses in the city of Mantova, a very articulated and complex reality, starting from the fruition of its places and according to its morphological, environmental, cultural and perceptive aspects.

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Introduction

The cultural debate about European and Italian towns (Romano, 1993; Clemente, 2001) has shown that public spaces – streets, squares, gardens, etc. – are a symbol of the "*civitas*", the hub of shared life and the key of the town. Public spaces date back to the beginning of human society: according to Gehl, first came '*life, then spaces, then buildings*' (Gehl, 1987).

Starting from XIX century public spaces have fallen in crisis because of society's way of living changes and needs: nowadays public spaces are the '*theater of modern world ripped contradictions*' (Schiaffonati, 1994: 105) and, according to Gregotti, they are '*privatized, depending on the market, downgraded, abandoned and no more the hub of society*' (Gregotti, 2002: 29). From literature the decline of public spaces can be summarised in a few steps. First, the principles of neoliberalism have exacerbated inequalities and segregation, therefore weakening the social living mixité and privatising both common goods and public spaces. Then, Public Administrations have slowly dropped their capability to organise public spaces able to please everyone's rights and needs. Finally, the growth of the urban intricacy has increased traffic, mobility and equipment needs too (information, communication and other facilities as garbage management, etc.) - public spaces have been gradually obstructed with objects (signs, parking meters, garbage bins, etc.), worsening fruition condition and not respecting places' identity.

This course of crisis has damaged the identity of places especially in the historic urban landscapes that are recognised as '*cultural heritage*' (D.Lgs. 42/2004; European Landscape Convention, 2000), '*common heritage of Europe*' (Faro Convention, 2005) and '*world heritage*' (UNESCO, 2011).

To understand how historic urban landscapes are taking care of their public spaces, the proposed survey has compared Management Plans of Italian towns that are enrolled in the UNESCO World Heritage List (WHL). The review has been limited to Italian UNESCO sites because, according to literature, Italy is the urban peninsula '*par excellence*' (Daverio, 2010) and, furthermore, it possesses the greatest number of historic urban landscapes registered in the WHL that follow specific national guide lines to draft their Management Plan.

The comparison of Management Plans has shown that most of the sites recognise the importance of requalification and maintenance of open spaces, but a programmatic line to requalify public spaces is still lacking. Hence, starting from the analysis of plans adopted by the cities, we have identified seven general strategies that should be considered when designing activities and actions to regain and requalify public spaces. The proposed approach has been applied to the UNESCO site of Mantova and Sabbioneta, where a bottom-up process has been activated to involve city users in the regaining and care of their public spaces.

The rest of the article is organised as follows: "Background and Related Work" section describes the meaning of the historic urban landscape according to UNESCO and presents the comparison of Management Plans. Then, section "Proposed Strategies for Regaining Public Spaces" pinpoints a programmatic line to regain and requalify public spaces, detailing the proposed strategies, while in "The UNESCO Site of Mantova and Sabbioneta: a Case Study" we summarize some actions tested in Mantova to involve citizens in the regaining of public spaces. Finally, we conclude the article discussing the results and proposing further research activities.

Background and related works

The new definition of "historic urban landscape" given by UNESCO in the Vienna Memorandum goes beyond the notion of "old town centre": the urban area is now considered as the result of the historic stratification of values, cultural and natural characteristics (UNESCO, 2005). This whole is also formed by its open spaces, green or not, its topographic and hydrologic aspects, including visual perceptions and relations (UNESCO, 2011).

According to UNESCO Recommendations, approaching to the historic urban landscape means to preserve the quality of its "human" aspects, through a sustainable use of open spaces, by recognising their dynamic nature, and by supporting their social and functional diversities. This approach gives the opportunity to integrate both the purposes of conservation of urban heritage and the aims of both social and economic development. Once acknowledged that public open spaces have their own identities and their requalification passes through integrated processes based also on the conservation of the existing buildings, we can move to an analysis of some Management Plans of UNESCO's World Heritage cities. These plans are fundamental documents as far as conservation and enhancement are concerned, and give tools for a more effective design of open spaces.

Since programming and monitoring sites' management was fundamental, in 2002 UNESCO obliged new candidates to present an adequate Management Plan; in 2004 the cities already awarded were asked to present the same documentation too. At the moment it is difficult to understand the real diffusion of this tool at worldwide level because a census is missing. Even at a European level the situation is quite heterogeneous, mainly because a number of different characteristics can be identified from country to country. We focused our analysis on Italian cities, where Management Plans are quite common: about 60% of the sites have adopted these tools, the majority of them have started the design while about 4% is still waiting to begin with the procedures (SITI, 2012: 38).

Availability and clarity of this documentation have been major criteria in the choice of potential case studies. We considered only UNESCO sites with an "urban complex" characterisation, this means having a limited part of a city with homogenous spatial, historic and cultural features.

Forty-eight Italian sites have been classified according to their location, the dimensions of the preserved area, the criteria for application, the specific types of sites. Going beyond the UNESCO mapping which identifies cultural, natural and mixed sites, a synthetic definition has been applied to each site to exclude those without the typical "urban complex" characteristics. The result is that only fourteen of the 51 Italian UNESCO sites preserve urban complexes: Historic Centre of Rome, the Properties of the Holy See in that City Enjoying Extraterritorial Rights and San Paolo Fuori le Mura; Historic Centre of Florence; Venice and its Lagoon; Historic Centre of San Gimignano; City of Vicenza and the Palladian Villas of Veneto; Historic Centre of Siena; Historic Centre of Naples; Ferrara, City of Renaissance, and its Po Delta; Historic Centre of the City of Pienza; Historic Centre of Urbino; Assisi, the Basilica of San Francesco and Other Franciscan Sites; City of Verona; Late Baroque Towns of the Val di Noto; Mantova and Sabbioneta (Table 1).

Sites	Date of Inscription	Area	Management Plan	Core Zone	UNESCO Criteria
Historic Centre of Rome, the Properties of the Holy See in that City Enjoying Extraterritorial Rights and San Paolo Fuori le Mura.	1980 (1990)	Lazio	Not available	1485 ha	(i)(ii)(iii)(iv)(vi)
Historic Centre of Florence	1982	Toscana	2006	505 ha	(i)(ii)(iii)(iv)(vi)
Venice and its Lagoon	1987	Veneto	2012	5500 ha	(i)(ii)(iii)(iv)(v)(vi)
Historic Centre of San Gimignano	1990	Toscana	Not available	14 ha	(i)(iii)(iv)
City of Vicenza and the Palladian Villas of the Veneto	1994	Veneto	2007	334 ha	(i)(ii)
Historic Centre of Siena	1995	Toscana	2011	170 ha	(i)(ii)(iv)
Historic Centre of Naples	1995	Campania	2011	1021 ha	(ii)(iv)
Ferrara, City of the Renaissance, and its Po Delta	1995	Emilia	2002	46712 ha	(ii)(iii)(iv)(v)(vi)
Historic Centre of the City of Pienza	1996	Toscana	2005	441 ha	(i)(ii)(iv)
Historic Centre of Urbino	1998	Marche	2012	29 ha	(ii)(iv)
Assisi, the Basilica of San Francesco and Other Franciscan Sites	2000	Umbria	Not available (2010)	-	(i)(ii)(iii)(iv)(vi)
City of Verona	2000	Veneto	Not available (2005)	453 ha	(ii)(iv)
Late Baroque Towns of the Val di Noto (South-Eastern Sicily)	2002	Sicilia	2002	113 ha	(i)(ii)(iv)(v)
Mantova and Sabbioneta	2008	Lombardia	2006	175 + 70 ha	(ii)(iii)

Table 1. Italian urban complex registered in the World Heritage List.

We have focused our attention on the specific interventions for the management of open spaces, in order to identify the major targets and their executive tools, projects and actions to reach the desired goals. All the suitable Management Plans have been analysed, with the exception of Venice, for its extraordinary quality of "lagoon-city", and the Val di Noto, for the difficulties in identifying its urban dimensions within the extended area formed by the eight preserved districts. Last but not least, the sites of Rome, San Gimignano, Assisi and Verona have not been analysed because their Management Plans were not available. For those "mixed" sites where natural (Ferrara and its Po Delta) or architectural (City of Vicenza and the Palladian Villas of the Veneto) elements are involved, only the specific part of the documentation about the urban complex has been evaluated.

The Management Plans' actions of the remaining eight plans have been grouped into categories to better identify the design area for open public spaces: participated design/planning, quality of the street furniture, maintenance of public spaces, accessibility and sustainable mobility, usability and safety of spaces, cultural aspects, technological aspects, services in the old town centre, and governance policies.

Participated design/planning

The majority of the analysed sites still involves private citizens only for the participated design/planning: horizontal subsidiarity, based on the principle that our cultural heritage is a "common good" that must be preserved by everyone, it is still very far from being applied. Only three sites over eight involve private citizens in the management of public spaces (Ferrara, Pienza and Urbino) through a number of periodic events where people can discuss.

Quality of the street furniture

A common feeling is that the quality of public spaces must be improved through the modification of the street furniture (Ubertazzi, 1994), renewing paving, benches, lamps, vegetation and poster designing. In nearly every case, specific guidelines have been provided (color, style, etc.) as well as regulations for equipping public spaces, normally "attacked" by elements such as chairs and tables, which are typical of food services, in a proper way (Siena Management Plan, 2011: 72).

Maintenance of public spaces

Maintenance services for public spaces are still very dependent from maintenance services for edifices and memorials: working on an existing building gives the opportunity to renew a part of paving or to restore monuments, which are usually situated in squares. About every site we have studied needs to be looked after and cared for, but only three cities (Vicenza, Siena and Urbino) have adopted a maintenance plan for facades and street furniture.

Accessibility and sustainable mobility

Most of sites agree upon how accessibility to the city and its historic centre should be improved in order to avoid traffic and the consequent noise and environmental pollution. Parked cars compromise the perception of the city and obstruct the pedestrian flow, causing problems to commercial activities too. A number of cities imagine easy-to-access "park and ride" systems, reduced private mobility thanks to sustainable lines, cycling lanes for slow mobility, major connections between the core zone and the buffer zone. Half of the sites encourage the requalification of some routes (even pedestrian ones) to remove "interruptions" within the city, as well as a shuttle system in order to connect the parking areas to the pedestrian areas. As far as this last point is concerned, only three cities (Vicenza, Siena and Urbino) offer special rates to promote the use of public transport and shuttles.

Usability and safety of spaces

The adequate usability of public spaces is generally considered a common goal: six sites over eight are determined to monitor the decline of some specific areas (situated both within and outside the core zone) and to requalify squares, natural territories and

symbolic gardens of the city's identity. Half of the sites provides tools to improve the buffer zone from the environmental and architectural points of view, and in order to increase the city's security through the study of street lighting: this, of course, also reflects on the citizens' perception of public spaces. Only Florence, Vicenza and Naples perceive the need for a better use and sense of the city gates.

Cultural aspects

The cultural aspect in the design of public spaces is very relevant: this is the reason why the majority of the sites tend to reintroduce the historic viability through itineraries focused on the city's past. Not only posters, but also old axes connected to specific monuments (Basilica, walls, etc.) underlie the regeneration of this system. Furthermore, three sites over eight extend their itineraries' cultural values to the rural environment (Ferrara, Pienza and Urbino).

Technological aspects

New digital technologies are fundamental to improve the citizens' perception/usability of public open spaces, but only three sites (Vicenza, Siena and Ferrara) have adopted smart tools (QR code, App, audio-guides, etc.) to free overloaded areas from exceeding furniture. Only Naples takes advantage of these technologies to develop the site's accessibility. For a number of sites the technological aspect is limited to the realisation of a web site offering pictures and suggested itineraries.

Services in the old town centre

As stated by the Management Plan of Urbino, repopulating the old town centre is fundamental in order to requalify the residential area and its inhabitants. If we fight against depopulation, we have the opportunity to rebuild a society, where citizens take care of their city. One of the major targets for most of the sites is to make their centres more attractive by improving the service industry at all levels (shops, cultural events, orderly street furniture, etc.), by investing not only in the existing commercial networks but also in small shops and antique activities, by reactivating older promenades. Other actions are more focused on solving specific problems such as inconveniences caused by construction sites (Vicenza), collection of rubbish (Siena, Naples and Urbino), delivery of goods (Florence, Siena, Naples and Urbino). There are other strategies which have been adopted by half of the sites we have analysed such as the recycling of abandoned spaces and buildings for housing innovative and cultural events, the deep study of information-points and their location with a view to services like the well-known bike sharing, car sharing, luggage shops, taxi areas, etc.

Governance policies

Eventually, it is important that every action inside the Management Plan, and generally every project, has its own time schedule containing both the involved players and the potential financiers. These specifications can be found in nearly every Management Plan we have analysed but only the half of them considers negotiation talks between parts and a consequent adaptation of the city plans after the registration to the WHL. Furthermore, only Vicenza has developed a document for planned preventative maintenance of its public open spaces.

Proposed strategies for regaining public spaces

According to the proposed analysis of Management Plans, most of the sites agree on the importance of open spaces requalification and maintenance. Nevertheless, these activities are disconnected and not integrated into urban processes: public open spaces may (or may not) find a placement within the Management Plan strategies, but it depends on its redactor's sensibility, since general rules for approaching these plans do not exist.

It is necessary that all the components of a city "work together" so that the design of public spaces, which are part of the cultural heritage, contemplates both their social and economic functions, as well as their objective qualities.

The approach to technological and environmental design goes beyond what can be defined as a "sector-based vision": it consists of "more complex approaches, whose aim is to rule the invisible" (Gambaro, 2012: 47-49). This method is essential in order to analyse wider environmental processes (Gangemi 2001), by considering the immaterial traits of the design and its social-economical sustainability (Schiaffonati et al, 2011:11).

To enhance the historic urban landscape a systemic approach is needed: a design conceived through separated single elements is not enough. An interface between a project and the other is fundamental in order to improve the quality of the urban structure starting from its own and environmental traits. In this way, the core zone will regain its "image" (Lynch, 1960) and the design will involve also the buffer zone.

Here we propose a programmatic line, consisting of seven strategies that should be followed when designing new actions for regaining public spaces.

1. The identity of the city and systemic vision

The contemporary city must act on the basis of a strategic vision of its own development by promoting the respect for its identity, by protecting its cultural heritage and by reusing its disused areas. A participative approach able to involve all the social classes is needed for farsighted governance.

This is true especially for the system of public spaces. Every "space" is a potential "place", that is why it is precious and must be perceived as a high-quality architecture with both a visual and an emotional impact.

Even though we are talking about a systemic approach, a little autonomy must always exist in the design phase. This "freedom" produces a coherent system of different interventions whose fulfilment is not strictly connected to the modification of general, financial or social parameters.

2. The system of open spaces as a "skeleton"

The design of the system of open spaces is not limited to the improvement of the street furniture: its target is to trigger a regeneration of the places, which are the "bones" of this "complex organism". We are not talking about a trivial sequence of spaces (football fields, streets, squares, gardens, etc.) but a "skeleton", filled by all the empty spaces, which connects the urban centre to the surrounding areas (Peraboni and Corsini, 2011: 31-37).

The design must start with a deep analysis of this complexity in order to understand how the urban landscape has evolved in time. Other purposes are to know the morphological and functional peculiarities of the place, its polarities, its services and possible connections.

Even if in most cases the general urban quality has got worse in these last decades, there are a few examples that have to be taken into account, such as Barcelona and Lyon,

where the major polarities have been perfectly integrated and connected to the "bones" of the open spaces.

Through structuring the public spaces, it is possible to preserve their networks (cycling lanes, promenades, greenery, mobility, etc.), to improve urban accessibility and sustainability, to give prominence to less known realities situated in the town centre.

3. The environmental components of sustainable open spaces

Design strategies must facilitate urban and social sustainability by preserving the natural environment, by enhancing the qualities of the historic urban landscape, by limiting man's activities and overexploitation of natural resources. The usability of open spaces is increased if urban environments are comfortable, the climate is appropriate, the pollution (noise, air, etc.) are under control.

The design of elements connected to sensory perception helps in restoring a territory's cultural identity: visual and auditory attracters must be highlighted in open spaces to improve the system's accessibility and the user's orientation, the sense of touch may ease the materials' perception, smells shall make places more or less pleasant.

4. Orderly, "free", safe and comfortable public spaces

Public spaces are the historic places of the community and of the urban life, thus why they must be safe, comfortable, accessible, attractive and free to use. The design is bound to study the "flow system" paying attention to itineraries, materials and street furniture by favouring the pedestrian point of view, by making risky places safer, by installing different paving materials according to the users' needs, by scheduling the spaces' maintenance, by improving the street lighting and the town's cleanliness, by making the cities accessible to disabled people.

Nowadays urban spaces are overcrowded with road signs, billboards, tables, beach umbrellas, chairs, benches, etc.: specific regulations, focused on "subtracting" rather than "adding", are needed in order to "free" and uniform these spaces, putting them in order.

5. Culture as a "plus"

Cultural and formative aspects are important in order to increase the territory's awareness and to ease communication among the involved key players. The urban identity must be enhanced starting from the historical background of the city (Peraboni and Corsini, 2011: 141-147): it is not only the result of consolidated processes, but also the evolution of circumstances and the creation of stories and relationships.

Restoring the cultural aspects of a city and of its public spaces, by operating on the historic viability and the ways to use it, is fundamental. That is how the route interprets the spaces of customs, by narrating the presence of the past, assuming a dialogical value (Jappelli, 2012: 11). Itineraries may be various (historic-cultural, cycle-touristic, naturalistic, spiritual, wine and food, etc.), but they have to be realised not only through posters and signals but also by starting a requalification process of the chosen path (paving recycling, removal of asphalt and sidewalks to highlight the pedestrian purpose, specific lighting, replacement of inadequate street lights, new street furniture, reuse of abandoned areas, etc.). New digital technologies (QR codes, Apps, audio-guides, projections, etc.) may ease the perception and the usability of the areas crossed by the itinerary.

6. The historic centre as a setting for functional diversity

An attractive city offers its users a number of possible activities in a high-quality setting. Contemporary societies are complex and unstable: social and economic conditions constantly change and historic towns become historic centres without inhabitants (OWHC, 2013).

It is necessary to define the complexity of urban functions (commercial networks, small shops and antique activities, cultural events, bike sharing, car sharing, luggage shops, taxi areas, etc.), by ensuring that old and new districts work well together. The challenge is to manage the relations at different levels and to avoid the isolation of single functions (OWHC, 2013).

7. Open spaces as common goods

Citizens' involvement is essential to define the future urban landscape and to design urban projects that suit to local realities and respect the traditions and skills of the communities (OWHC, 2013).

Citizens must be educated on the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity: public spaces are common goods born from partnerships and sharing. In the future, these spaces will be managed through an cooperation among the citizenry, the administrative office and the other institutions located on the territory. We are talking about a long and articulated process that needs alternative economic rules and new social mechanisms. In the meantime, it is possible to promote the sense of awareness and to sensitise the community in taking care of its own city. Because of the intrinsic value of the urban landscape of a WHL site, a few more devices are needed: a simplified maintenance manual for low skilled people, a cooperation agreement (Comune di Bologna, 2014) to regulate the citizens' participation to meetings, scheduled classes for protecting both the volunteers and the monuments.

The UNESCO site of Mantova and Sabbioneta: a case study

The need to identify design strategies to enhance public spaces within the historic urban landscape is included in the research and test activities currently considered for the UNESCO site of Mantova and Sabbioneta.

This site is an excellent area of applicability because of its urban shape, moulded over many years by the Gonzaga family. This feature is also one of the major reasons why Mantova has been admitted, together with Sabbioneta, to the World Heritage List in 2008 and it becomes Italian capital of Culture in 2016. The "Gonzaga-theme", a symbol of Mantova's cultural and social identity, has become so important that, in addition to the enrolment to the WHL, a specific cultural district has been created in order to finance the research activities. This cultural district, named "Le Regge dei Gonzaga", is a network of municipalities that are close to Mantova and endowed with a Gonzaga mansion (that is the meaning of "reggia", *pl.* "regge"). Its target is to coordinate the preventive and planned conservation of these buildings.

The city can not be merely seen as a heap of significant monuments but rather needs to be considered as a living organism (HerO, 2011). That is why the current research activities are focused on beating the "single monument" approach in favour of a systemic method where the city, its layout, its connections, its empty and open spaces are treated as an organic whole.

Thanks to the project named "(O)URS 2.0 – Our Urban Regeneration Space 2.0", that won the ideas competition attended in Mantova "La cultura come bene comune" (Culture as a common good), we have been able to examine in depth the role of public space as a common good (TEMA, 2015).

The project (O)URS 2.0 consisted of three phases: identification and analysis of public spaces to regain; city users' needs examination talking of public spaces' usability, accessibility and equipment; development of the citizens' *desiderata* to write a document with the designing directions.

Together with the "UNESCO Mantova e Sabbioneta" office, ten Mantuan historic public spaces have been selected, and for each of them we have organised some events called "Take care of your city step by step". During these events citizens were guided to understand the importance of public spaces and how to regain them using co-design tools. These *ad hoc* tools were "Vote your Space", "Help us to analyse this Space!", and "How would you prefer this Space?". In the first step, citizens could choose their favourite space on a poster, then they were allowed to add, modify, or remove equipment icons inside the space model in order to indicate potential criticalities (vegetation, benches, mail boxes, telephone boxes, street lightning, waste bins, etc.) and, finally, everyone was invited to write down possible ways to approach the design of the area or a few tips for taking care of it.

The most important achievement of *(O)URS 2.0* was not the requalification design but the activation of a participative bottom-up process aiming to make citizens aware of the criticalities of public spaces: by involving the city users we had the opportunity to regain and take care of these spaces. Practically, thanks to the cooperation among different key players, it was possible to halve the costs by activating an "operative" network among schools, universities and institutions.

Conclusion

The proposed strategies are a first step to move toward public spaces' requalification in historic urban landscapes. The continuance of the survey has highlighted that regaining is only a step to requalify public spaces: the test activities applied to the site of Mantova and Sabbioneta and to the cultural district "Le Regge dei Gonzaga" have shown that it is necessary to identify a programmatic line to help Public Administrations to requalify public spaces in relation with their territory. Specifically, the areas of intervention for requalification both at local and wide level are fruition, identity, environment and digital tools.

Ongoing works are devoted to study the requalification of public spaces to enhance the territory: overcoming urban borders of single historic urban landscapes and exploiting public space system to connect these realities (urban, rural, natural, etc.) will make it possible to value the territory and thus creating the '*Diffused UNESCO City*' (Giordano, 2015).

The "Diffused UNESCO City" concept was born following and overcoming the historic urban landscape approach bringing on two research occasions: all 'historic centres' can to be considered like historic urban landscapes even if they are not registered in the World Heritage List; furthermore the UNESCO town should not only manage what is defined as 'core area' or 'buffer area' but also enclose all that portrays the identity of the territory.

In the future, we plan to test the "Diffused UNESCO City" application through the requalification and regaining of public spaces: a few strategies ascribable to a systemic vision to evaluate cultural, landscape and environmental heritage as a *unicum* through cooperation as a model.

Acknowledgments

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