Bridging theories, strategies and practices in valuing cultural heritage

edited by Mara Cerquetti
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Smart Value Project

Scientific Modern Analysis of Research Topic

Values and valuation as key factors in protection, conservation and contemporary use of heritage – a collaborative research of European cultural heritage


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Partners: Vilnius Academy of Arts, Vilnius, Lithuania; Politecnico di Milano, Milano, Italy; University of Macerata, Macerata, Italy; Altravia s.r.l., Rome, Italy

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WP4 – Application of the SMART Values methodology in pilot projects

The volume collects the experience of national stakeholders in valuing cultural heritage and the perspective of the international partners involved in the project.
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1. The Poggibonsi Archaeodrome: a Public Archaeology project

The park of Poggio Imperiale in Poggibonsi (prov. Siena, Italy) is an archaeological and monumental area of 12 hectares, delimited by the walls of a never completed 16th century fortress, built by Lorenzo de’ Medici and planned by the architect Giuliano da Sangallo. It includes an archaeological area extended over 2 hectares, which represents part of a much larger long-term settlement context dating from the 5th to the 16th century AD. The site has been investigated by the University of Siena for over fifteen years, starting in 19931.

The archaeological sequence of the site revealed the slow formation of an early medieval settlement, the rise of an “almost town” between 1155 and 1270 AD and a failed attempt of Emperor Henry VII (in 1313) to found a new city on the ruins of the previous one.

This context has been the object, since 2003, of a heritage development program carried out by the local Municipality,
focused on the fortress citadel and on the spaces enclosed by the walls; an enterprise which has had an alternate history of successes and failures, until in 2014 a proactive and innovative project started, based on a complete reconsideration of the approaches towards the public.

Besides revitalizing the heart of the fortress (its citadel) and renovating the walls for over a kilometer and a half, this new season also heavily focused on experientiality, trying to involve the highest possible number of potential users of these historic spaces. In fact, taking up an old idea of the 1997 park master-plan, we started to set up an open-air museum centred on one of the most interesting archaeological presences among those traced on the hill: the 9th-10th century manorial village and its settlement structures.

Such an effort is something really new for our country; not in its form, but surely for its contents and for the relationship with the potential audience, as well as for the cultural heritage politics context in which it fits.

The Poggibonsi Archaeodrome is a project that pursues an in-progress full scale reconstruction of the 17 structures found during the excavation of a Carolingian Age village (Appendix, figg. 1-6).

To date, available funds allowed us to build a longhouse (residence of the landlord), a peasant hut with farmyard and hen house, the blacksmith’s forge, a bread oven, two barns and the vegetable garden; and also some temporary sheds for craft activities, destined in the near future to be replaced by other huts and a large wooden granary on elevated platform.

The project, backed up by the Siena Museums Foundation and the City of Poggibonsi, started in 2014 with a small share of public funds. The first lot of the village was inaugurated the same year, in October, while the second lot followed in January 2016 (openings, respectively, on 18-19 October 2014 and 15-16 January 2016). We are already committed to raise funds in order to continue towards completion of the village. The cost

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Valenti 2015a; Valenti 2015b; Valenti 2016a; Valenti 2016b; Valenti 2016c.
of the operation is to date extremely “ethical”, having spent around € 40,000.

In the reconstructions, strictly based on excavation data, we implemented the following operative steps: careful review of excavation records and interpretations; interaction and confrontation with structural engineers in order to refine the reconstructive hypothesis on the basis of our ideas, paying special attention to the size and height of the posts, the shape and depth of the postholes, as well as their spatial arrangement; production of the definitive hypothesis; safety plan for the construction site; finally, the actual building activity.

During this last phase, while respecting the choices dictated by the safety plane (for example, the six central posts of the longhouse were cemented at the base of their lodgings, since the structure was planned to endure a continuous visitors’ flow), we followed a strict experimental approach for what concerns tools and building techniques.

The whole work has been recorded day by day and in real time, with multiple daily posts, photos, videos, etc., on the Facebook page “Archeodromo live”, in order to stimulate participation, debate and discussion, as well as ensure complete transparency of the whole operation.

The Archaeodrome is indeed very active when it comes to online communication. The aim was, and still is, to give immediate public accessibility to all our activities, showing the work in progress, the solutions we found, our successes as well as our failures. To put some order in the assorted mix of published information, the communication strategy has been outlined in thematic sections grouped into specific subjects and highlighted in individual posts with significant titles, like “verso l’Archeodromo” (towards the Archaeodrome), “i giorni di lavoro” (working days), “metodo” (methodology) and so on. This typological distinction of the published posts is effective precisely in covering an information disclosure based on different learning levels, allowing an in-detail handling of the proposed themes. During the construction phase, or in occasion of buildings renovations, the most frequent posts refer to the thematic section “i giorni di lavoro” (working days), reporting live about the
ongoing activities. Information on the construction techniques of the huts has also constantly been published, raising the followers’ curiosity (expressed through online questions) about the methods and solutions adopted for specific structural problems, clearly illustrated also through a large number of pictures. For example, several questions were related to the choice of the earthen floors or to the composition of the clay walls, or even to the type of fiber used for binding the wooden structural elements. In other words, the progress of the construction site, albeit virtual, triggered a process of curiosity, directly satisfied by the archaeologists working at the site. These have been able to give “live” explanations about the ongoing work and the constructive choices.

In fact, the Poggibonsi Archaeodrome has witnessed an immediate success in terms of visitors and followers, as well as the attention of national and local mass media: prime time, large audience television shows and news on the national public channels (Rai TV), such as “Superquark”, “Bell’Italia”, TG2 and TG3; but also frequent reports within the programs of “Rai Storia” (the public TV history channel), which turned the Archaeodrome into a privileged location to talk about the Middle Ages: well-known shows on private televisions, like “DiMartedì”, broadcast on the La7 national TV channel. All of them came to Poggibonsi to talk about the virtues of our project, as well as many electronic newspapers and blogs. Even the German public-service radio broadcaster “Bayerischer Rundfunk” visited us and interviewed the Archaeodrome inhabitants, as well as the Rai Radio2 show “Caterpillar” and the radio “Made in Italy”, which reaches 5 million listeners in 38 different countries. Finally, many national newspapers and magazines have written about our experience, from “L’Espresso” to “L’Unità” and “Left”.

Those who visit the Archaeodrome can meet the archaeologists/re-enactors/experimenters while they are tilling the land with replicas of plows and agricultural tools, produced on the basis of archaeological finds and iconographies; or they can see a blacksmith, covered with soot, while he operates on hand bellows to blow air into the forge and hammers an iron
bar to produce a knife blade very similar to those found in the archaeological contexts of the nearby excavations; they can also follow the training sessions of warriors using swords, spears and shields crafted by the same re-enactors; or, again, they might sit down with women around the fireplace, watching them as they prepare flat bread using specific coarse pottery, or cook soups in jars as they did, in the same places, over a thousand years ago. These are just a few of the many activities which are being carried out within the settlement. The visitor can “disturb” the villagers, asking them information about what they are doing, or directly try to use their tools and repeat their gestures.

Our goal is just that; not simply to rebuild features, but to create a real “Archaeodrome experience”, making it a place where people can learn while having fun, getting in direct contact with the materiality of history by living and experimenting it. In other words, it is a Public Archaeology operation, clearly open to everybody, where we capture the attention of the audience through “doing”. It becomes therefore possible to effectively communicate scientific data produced by archaeological investigations, often combining them with historical facts in order to provide a complete picture of the world we are representing.

It is a quite complex challenge, which has to be articulated by calibrating different types of activities. That’s why the archaeologists also interpret narrative roles, following storytelling techniques. In fact, we propose ourselves as a new Italian reconstructive approach, based both on experimental archaeology and storytelling-living history; the first ever in our country focusing on the early Middle Ages. At the Archaeodrome, re-enactors are committed to start from an excavation context and bring it back to life. It wants to be a form of immersion in materiality by the general audience, providing means to educate people to archaeology and to what this discipline can understand and tell. Storytelling is therefore the essential element to be connected with the reconstruction; a way to portray real or fictitious events in words, images, sounds, gestures; a valuable form of communication, engaging content, emotions, intentions and contexts. Telling stories is the best way to transfer knowledge and experience.
2. Archeòtipo srl: a company for the management of a public archaeological site

Managing the Archaeodrome, its monthly events, the didactic/dissemination activities and, more generally, the cultural and touristic offer of the Park of the Poggio Imperiale Medicean Fortress, has been entrusted, by the municipality of Poggibonsi, to Archeòtipo srl.

Archeòtipo started in 2010 as a spin-off company of the University of Siena. It has been founded by a group of medieval archaeologists formed in the 1990s on the excavation of Poggibonsi, under the scientific direction of Riccardo Francovich and Marco Valenti. Over the years, this team developed great skills not only in field research, but also in the field of computer science applied to archaeology (LIAAM laboratory)\(^3\). In close relation to ICT activities, an intense effort to cope with aspects of management and communication of historical-archaeological research contents through evolving technologies was made. The first approach of the company to the market was therefore mainly focused on the development of IT solutions in the domain of cultural heritage, on field and preventive/rescue archaeology, as well as on the management of the structures of the Poggibonsi Park. We decided to start investing on experimental didactics, re-enactment and historical reconstruction. The beginnings, however, have been very hard, both for some difficulty in gaining visibility on the market – where other local actors had already occupied significant spaces – and because of our initial rawness in the entrepreneurial management of a company which we started out as neophytes. Finally, the lack of a strong project on which to structure the core business of the company also played an important role. The logical consequence of the foregoing has meant that the company simply remained a supplementary and complementary activity of the main research occupation carried out by members in different contractual forms at the University of Siena. The maintenance costs of the company significantly affected the total sales figure and, therefore, it was decided to

\(^3\) Fronza et al. 2009.
close the link between Archeòtipo and the University of Siena (as a spin-off we could use the university brand) and to limit fixed costs, which represented a high percentage of what we were able to cash in.

In 2014, after a few years of a municipal administration which was not particularly attracted by the potential of the Poggio Imperiale hill and of the park that had been inaugurated there in 2003, the situation finally changed. In Poggibonsi a new town government, led by a young mayor with young members wishing to find new solutions to the economic crisis striking also the Valdelsa productive district, decided to focus strongly on the project of implementing cultural activities in the fortress. Within just two months, work began on the Archaeodrome, starting with the construction of the longhouse, which was inaugurated in October of the same year. It has been an important step in implementing the park masterplan which had been on the table of city government since the mid-1990s. From this moment onward, Archeòtipo started a new phase with a heavy project to concentrate on and to carry out together with the development of the village (a new hut was inaugurated in January 2016). Except for ordinary adaptations dictated by external feedback as well as by internal reflections of the working group, the company’s strategy at this point becomes very clearly focused. The organization of events to communicate in a simple and direct way all the knowledge produced during years of research, as well as the didactic (for schools) and educational (for enthusiasts and researchers) activities providing scientific insight and quality, soon become the pillars on which to base the company’s undertakings. These are the two traits which almost exclusively identify our experience in the national cultural perspective (the only open-air museum dedicated to the early Middle Ages). The means through which approaching the general public have been identified in living history, experimental archaeology, and storytelling techniques. Our historical reconstruction is based on a strict philological rigor and on the choice to portray the common inhabitants of a common Carolingian Age village – that is, the vast majority of the population of the time –, while the small and medium warrior aristocracy (the most widespread expres-
ation within the early medieval Italian re-enactment scene) is only marginally represented. Re-enacting everyday life means first of all trying to focus attention on the ordinary and plain ways of life, mainly related to the humble layers of a society in which the well-being of extremely small élites is based on the uncertain, simple and silent lives of the masses. Providing a convincing picture of this “submerged” world is quite demanding; it would be far easier if we could use the relatively high number of (especially written and iconographic) sources which best testify the life and costumes of the higher layers of society. However, our slogan “Vivi il Medioevo” (Live the Middle Ages) can only start from the reflection on servile and peasant life, and from the use of less “selective” sources – primarily archaeological ones – which are more representative of the entire social range and of an everyday life. Excavation data related to burials, diet, construction techniques and home furnishings are the heart of our stories, our characters and our way of communicating the period and the context of the village. It is therefore clear how the peculiarity of our offerings lies in their unbreakable bond with research, which consequently determines a substantial part of the company’s strategy.

The model that Archeòtipo is trying to pursue proposes (hopefully with success) an evolution of the most traditional way of understanding, managing and communicating “the great beauty”. For years the cultural offer of our country has been linked to the “exploitation” of monuments, of collections and of an immense heritage which is felt as inexhaustible and in itself capable of attracting interest and tourism. Our approach looks more at those (mainly foreign) contexts that have been able to supply an altogether lesser quality of their heritage with a much more qualitative and persuasive, integrative and non-parasitic cultural offer. What Archeòtipo means to “sell” is therefore not a monument, a museum, an archaeological site or a landscape in itself, but much rather the years of common and collective research that we have been doing on the site and on the specific historical period for over two decades. We want to have a distinctive offer, based on proposing our scientific and experimental knowledge to the public. Despite focusing on a period
which is objectively unfamiliar (and systematically studied only in the last thirty years, at least in Italy), we immediately registered a strong curiosity of the public, probably also favored by the strongly immersive type of experience, with a marked material and sensorial footprint. The constantly growing demand implies a great effort, aimed at the qualitative development of our offer and its constant improvement. In this respect, we pay close attention to the ways of communicating and “converting” technical and specialist data into stories and narratives. We need to present, in a passionate and engaging way, contents derived from years of excavations and surveys that may be difficult to understand for people (a significant example are timber houses, recognized by a simple and certainly not spectacular succession of postholes).

It is in fact a shared opinion that communicating to the general public does not mean that research is being debased or its contents impoverished. On the opposite, it rather means that they are being treated with the scientific rigor that is a preparatory step to historical syntheses, which in turn are necessary for a more direct and enjoyable dissemination. Such an approach, as evidenced by our experience in these two years, attracts not only ordinary people, history enthusiasts and youngsters, but also researchers and specialists who have accepted, often with pleasure, the confrontation and involvement in historical reconstruction and storytelling activities. When this purely formal simplification of the archaeological data doesn’t happen, we face two alternatives. The first is made up of unattractive museum settings, which fail to fulfill their mission as a means of education, study and delight⁴. The second is the spread of the so-called archaeo-parks, where historical reconstruction gives way to more or less imaginative interpretations of the past, contributing to a distorted view of history, often reduced to a simple pretext for entertainment as an end to itself (but amusement parks are more than enough for that).

The economic management of an open air museum is obviously no easy matter, especially seeing our will to pursue a

⁴ Volpe 2016, pp. 79-80.
nearly total economic self-reliance that requires targeted and, at least in our case, rather prudent investments. So far, our greatest investment is represented by the time we spent at the Archaeodrome, thanks to a strong passion, but also to the confidence in a project in which we begin to see an employment opportunity, that can and should evolve from the precariousness of these initial stages, offering always more concrete guarantees despite the alternative and unconventional path we have undertaken. Such an approach can also benefit from the parallel construction of a network that aims to find and/or generate new resources on the territory, be activated through a strong convergence and a close collaboration between public actors (different levels of local administrations with the Municipality in first place, Siena University, the Siena Museums Foundation, the Elsa Foundation) and private subjects (Archeòtipo, the cultural association Started, the local economic and productive operators).

There are by now many experiences, among which we think we can also include ours, that are preparing the field to finally overcome the public/private dispute. We need to close the season of an aprioristic demonization of private initiative. This is one of the dogmas that has been marking for a long period of time the management of culture in Italy, which has always been entrusted exclusively to a state that has not been able to resolve the “evil of abundance”⁵. The debate on the subject turned out to be almost self-contained and definitely not connected to the very evolution of the concept of cultural good and of its usability; reflections have been far too often centered mainly (if not only) on the great monuments and the great museums. That’s why we argue that it is possible to make a living out of cultural heritage (archaeology, in our specific case) also outside the academic and ministerial circuits. In fact, it is absolutely legitimate, indeed desirable, that archaeology should generate wealth and an adequate remuneration for those who decide to invest their own lives and their efforts in this sector.

It is not an economy that weighs on the shoulders of heritage, but much rather a front-facing action that precedes it (in the

⁵ Ricci 1996.
sense of being able to become independent of the context itself) with the aim of enhancing it, guaranteeing that added value that only research can provide. Material evidences and features also speak through the ability of translating their history into events, into open and appealing content, into specific insights aiming at a generalized cultural growth of society in the broadest sense, making archaeology a growing and bottom-up demand. We do not need to undersell heritage, consuming it and exploiting it for its intrinsic value. It is much rather necessary to sell skills, studies, and insights to create jobs and at the same time to better qualify the diffused heritage, regardless of its nature and degree of notoriety to the general public. Italy has all the potential and the absolute demand to create interest and cultural offerings on that widespread network of sites that helps to recount historical landscapes and enhance contemporary landscapes. The traditional over-abundance of cultural operators, with respect to the actual and limited employment capacities, may perhaps find a partial solution in redistributing skills within the domain of interest, leveraging the opportunity to talk about and promote that silently scattered heritage, now unfortunately seen not as a resource but as a management issue. Such an endeavour is surely not easy, but at least small islands of experimentation can be set up for the creation of new models – which have to be replicable, save the necessary adaptations to fit individual realities – able to provide truly innovative and quality services that can guarantee a real added value to the cultural objects of enhancement and promotion. In this sense, Volpe’s recent publication has shown that there is no lack of valid examples, each structured in an autonomous and particular way, each testing a possible model marked by great managerial elasticity. It is the exact antithesis of the widespread tendency to pursue common standards that cannot adhere to contexts which are extremely varied, both in their offer and in the actors in charge of their management and administration.

The feasibility of these operations is in fact closely linked to the presence of a network of organizations, private bodies and

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6 Volpe 2016.
institutions that, better if by starting from the bottom, are able to create the conditions for professional opportunities. These, in turn, are generating demand to be redistributed on the territory, creating transversal virtuous systems that bring culture to communities, educational institutions, tour operators, craft and commercial businesses. This is what we are trying to do in Poggiobonsi and in the Valdelsa district, with agreements on different institutional and productive levels: between neighbouring administrations in order to create a cultural district based on the Middle Ages and on historic reconstruction; but also among diversified economic operators aiming at producing and selling quality artisanal production. History thus becomes a brand for the promotion and characterization of an entire area, which can so present itself to visitors and citizens as a community aware of its past and actively reflecting on its peculiarities. This coincides exactly with the recent encouragements contained in the Faro Convention: territorial identity and hospitality cannot only coexist, but need to be developed in a symbiotic path.

From this point of view, as a company we have started to build a network of relationships with travel agencies, tour operators and various economic subjects in order to convey diversified tourist flows (schools, cultural and experiential tourism, wine and food gourmet travels, etc.) towards the Archaeodrome, and consequently to redistribute them on the territory. This means activating synergies and collaborations that can in turn have a direct payback on the Archaeodrome’s activities. It is the case, for example, of a project with the craft brewery “Birrificio San Gimignano”, currently at its early stage. We started out with research on beer history, brewing techniques and preservation of the beverage in the Middle Ages, with the aim of establishing a stable collaboration based on mutual enrichment between producers and reconstructors. With the project we intend to add to the village’s features those needed for beer production and preservation. On the other hand, this collaboration has already produced a number of events combining the tasting of a local excellence product with different forms of presenting our histor-

7 Council of Europe 2005.
ical reconstruction. For us, this represents a moment of insight and study of the customs of the reconstructed age and village; for the brewer it is a way to anchor his product to the territory and to work on the discovery of new flavours, finding their roots in the history of the area. Both parts have in common one crucial aspect: experimentation.

Of course, that of the Archaeodrome is not the only activity of our company. Other areas are being expanded, such as preventative archaeology, the development of small ICT solutions mainly (but not only) addressed to the world of cultural heritage, as well as historical reconstruction activities not strictly tied the Poggibonsi Park (in this sense, our main project is centered on setting up a 13th century artisanal market). In a somewhat complex and sometimes disheartening context (especially with regard to preventive archaeology, which is systematically subjected to tenders based on the humiliating and degrading practice of the maximum discount rate of the original service value), for small business such as ours it becomes crucial to be able to have a certain visibility on the most common digital communication channels. Specifically, we spend a lot of time spreading our offer through social media and web platforms. Above all, we invest on Facebook pages, which are an ideal tool to get acquainted with, but above all to establish a direct link with the public and the potential users of our offerings. For example, the Facebook page “Archeodromo live”\(^8\) has now exceeded 7,000 followers, who are constantly updated on our activities, work, contents and services we propose at the Archaeodrome. On our part, such an intense effort has several implications: setting up a necessary operation of transparency, since we work in a public context; keeping a historical memory of what we have done and produced; a practical way of communicating with the public; finally, a marketing tool which is not based on simple promotional campaigns, sometimes oversized with respect to the actual offering, but on the presentation of how we are working on specific events or initiatives. Scientific research, dissemination and a vast and articulated video and photographic showcase are

perfectly interwoven on our Facebook page, representing our answer to an ethical duty (heritage and culture belong to the community). In our opinion, this is also the best way to establish a stronger and more sustained bond, both with citizenship and with potential present and future customers. We believe that the success (not only at an economic level) of a small private reality in the world of cultural heritage can only be achieved by following the double track of social responsibility and of a high quality cultural offering, never detached from a multifaceted research activity. This is exactly the reason for a new start (in July 2017) of the archaeological excavations on the hill of Poggio Imperiale, the investigations from which the Archeodromo project originated and from which it will be able to draw new data and renovated directions for its future development. Within two to three years, the entire village will be completed, with the reconstruction of all the structures already identified by the excavations carried out in the 1990s and early 2000s. New information may help to refine our interpretations and thus improve the visiting experience, providing fresh cultural insights for those who will want to try our experience in the coming years.

In the meantime, we can celebrate the recent encouraging results on tourist presences in the town of Poggibonsi, which can be related also to the presence of the Archaeodrome. In fact, Poggibonsi has always been squeezed among giants of tourism (it lies half way between Siena and Florence, very close to San Gimignano and Monteriggioni, near Volterra and the Chianti), but it never developed its own distinctive offer. The town has always been regarded mostly as a simple transit place between the different locations to be visited. The trend of the last two years (with a steady growth that exceeded 50% from one year to another) evidences the capability to intercept such flows, inviting tourists to stop at the hill of Poggio Imperiale, or even making it the exclusive destination for organized trips from all over Italy. It is an acknowledgment to the choice of offering a very special visit experience, where experientiality represents the real strong point and historical contents are paired by a truly
accessible communication approach, without forgetting the vital need to engage and entertain the visitors.

References


Appendix

Fig. 1. Poggibonsi Archaeodrome (Italy, prov. Siena), the inhabitants of the archaeodrome (Photo by Camillo Balossini)

Fig. 2. Poggibonsi Archaeodrome (Italy, prov. Siena), farmers (Photo by Camillo Balossini)
Fig. 3. Poggibonsi Archaeodrome (Italy, prov. Siena), daily work (Photo by Camillo Balossini)

Fig. 4. Poggibonsi Archaeodrome (Italy, prov. Siena), dominus dinner (Photo by Camillo Balossini)
Bridging theories, strategies and practices in valuing cultural heritage is published within the framework of the international scientific project Smart Value, that aims at developing a methodology for measuring and assessing the value of cultural heritage. The project is co-funded by the JPI Cultural Heritage and involves partners from Poland (Lublin University of Technology), Lithuania (Vilniaus Academy of Arts) and Italy (Politecnico di Milano, University of Macerata and Altravia s.r.l.).

The volume brings together the perspective of the international partners involved in the project and the one of some key stakeholders in the evaluation of cultural heritage in Italy.

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