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From Landscape As Collective Asset To The Ecomuseum As Instrument Of Territorial Valorisation Comparative Experiences Of Diffuse Cultural Heritage Regeneration

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Abstract

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The European Landscape Convention (Florence, 2000) marked an epistemological change shift in the concept of heritage, redefining it as a collective asset and a site for identity-forming practices.

Despite growing scholarly interest in ecomuseums as participatory heritage tools, the literature lacks integrated frameworks capable of assessing their contribution to urban and territorial regeneration across structurally different contexts. This paper addresses this gap by developing and applying an original four-dimensional analytical framework — encompassing typological-spatial relations, participatory governance, urban planning instruments, and impact assessment — to two contrasting Italian case studies:

: the Casilino Ecomuseum, in the south-eastern periphery of Rome, which recovers traces of peri-urban rurality embedded in multicultural housing practices; the Freidano Ecomuseum in Settimo Torinese, which valorises the industrial and riverine landscape by intertwining working-class identity and local biodiversity. The comparative analysis demonstrates that, despite their structural differences, both ecomuseums function as effective devices for implementing the Convention's principles through bottom-up processes of heritage recognition, civic participation and territorial regeneration. The study contributes a replicable interpretative and operational model. for ecomuseum-based landscape governance, with direct implications for urban planning policy and diffuse cultural heritage management.

Keywords: European landscape Convention; Historical-collective identity; Ecomuseums; Diffuse cultural heritage; Participatory governance.

1. Introduction

1.1 Towards A New Paradigm for Promoting Local Areas

The theme of landscape as a collective asset and identity resource has acquired growing centrality over recent decades in European urban and cultural debate. The progressive awareness that landscape is not simply the visual backdrop of settlement processes but constitutes the product of a continuous interaction between communities, collective memory and forms of dwelling, has led to a radical revision of the instruments for the protection and enhancement of territorial heritage. In this context, the ecomuseum has established itself as one of the most innovative and socially significant devices for the participatory management of diffuse cultural heritage, capable of responding to the new demands for identity, belonging and cohesion that characterise contemporary communities. The ecomuseum, in its most evolved conception, takes shape as an integrated cultural project that aims to exalt the territory as the privileged sphere of human-nature relations, as the locus of local community knowledge, as a testimony to environmental values and as a space that synergises the capacities of inhabitants to initiate processes of alternative economy and sustainable development. It represents, in short, the “design formula” capable of reconciling the needs for the promotion and development of a territory’s values with the necessity of protecting and enhancing cultural and environmental assets, both tangible and intangible (Maggi, 2002).

Situate the reader within current scholarship, clearly identifying the unresolved theoretical, methodological or empirical lacuna your study tackles. State explicit objectives or research questions, explain why the gap matters in broader disciplinary debates, and preview how your work advances understanding. Heading Guidelines should be as below:

1.2 European Landscape Convention: Normative and Conceptual Framework of Ecomuseum Practices

Within this theoretical and operational framework, the adoption of the European Landscape Convention in July 2000 and its opening for signature in Florence on 20 October of the same year marked a decisive turning point. For the first time in the history of European international law, a legal instrument focused exclusively on the protection, management and enhancement of European landscapes, recognising them as a shared cultural and natural heritage (Council of Europe, 2000). The Convention is distinguished by a radically expanded conception of landscape: no longer limited to sites of exceptional natural or monumental value, but extended to all landscapes, including ordinary, peri-urban and degraded ones, as essential elements of the quality of life of European populations (Priore, 2009; Council of Europe, 2000). The

Convention's fundamental conceptual contribution lies in having definitively established that landscape is not an objective feature of nature or a mere visual backdrop, but a relational construct that emerges from the dynamic interaction between physical environments, social practices and collective perceptions. Article 1 defines landscape as "a specific area of territory, as perceived by the population, whose character results from the action of natural and/or human factors and their interrelationships" (Council of Europe, 2000). This formulation incorporates and institutionalises a well-established theoretical concept in geographical and anthropological studies: the landscape is always, simultaneously, a material reality and a cultural representation (Cosgrove, 1984; Olwig, 2002). The landscape, on the other hand, interacts with culture not only insofar as it is a product of it — one need only think of "humanised landscapes", shaped by millennia of human intervention — but also insofar as it is perceived, interpreted and imbued with specific meanings. This is what can be called the "mirror effect" of the landscape (Gambino, 1997): the ability to provide communities with a representation of themselves that fosters a sense of belonging and motivation for collective action. Like the landscape, the ecomuseum also functions as a mirror in which people look at themselves and can recognise themselves, confirming their identity or reworking it in response to ongoing changes. The "mirror function" of the landscape (Gambino, 1997) constitutes the anthropological foundation upon which both the Convention and ecomuseum practice are based: both start from the premise that preserving a landscape means preserving — and at the same time renewing — the web of relationships and meanings through which a community constructs itself.

The Convention also introduces a processual and democratic conception of landscape heritage that definitively supersedes the elitist and monumentalist logic of previous regulatory instruments (Guaran, Michelutti 2021). Heritage is not a pre-existing datum waiting to be "discovered" by experts and protected by the State (Pătru-Stupariu, Nita, 2022), but a process of social construction — of heritage-making — in which local communities play a central and irreplaceable role (Hartog, 2003; Smith, 2006). Traditional protection systems tend to privilege the aesthetic and historical values recognised by experts, marginalising the everyday practices and collective memories that constitute the backbone of lived heritage. The Convention inverts this logic, placing the perceptions of populations at the centre of the process of recognising landscape value (Shutt, 2025). The Convention enshrines this principle in Article 5, which commits the Parties to "recognise landscapes in law as an essential component of people's surroundings" and to "integrate landscape into their regional and town planning policies and in their cultural, environmental, agricultural, social and economic policies" (Council of Europe, 2000). This is not, therefore, a form of protection exercised over places, but a policy constructed with the populations who inhabit, perceive and transform those places. This conceptual shift — from heritage as object to heritage as process — has decisive implications for the role of ecomuseums. If heritage is the result of a collective selection and attribution of value, then the ecomuseum naturally takes shape as the institutional device most suited to managing this process in an inclusive and participatory manner (Scazzosi, 2025). The ecomuseum does not conserve a pre-given heritage: it constructs it, negotiates it and continuously updates it together with the community, exactly as the Convention requires to happen for landscape (Maggi, 2002; Davis, 1999).

The third element of convergence between the Convention and ecomuseum practice concerns the governance model. The preamble of the Convention clearly expresses the desire to "meet the public's wish to enjoy high quality landscapes and to play an active part in the development of landscapes" (Council of Europe, 2000). Article 5c commits the Parties to "establish procedures for the participation of the general public, local and regional authorities, and other parties with an interest in the definition and implementation of landscape policies". This multi-level and participatory governance model — which values local knowledge, encourages community protagonism and reduces the distance between decision-makers and inhabitants — corresponds exactly to the operational model of ecomuseums, in which the local community is simultaneously the subject, object and beneficiary of cultural action (De Varine, 2005; Corsane, 2005).

It should be noted, in this context, that since 2003 UNESCO has also safeguarded intangible heritage — oral traditions, performing arts, festivals, rituals, craftsmanship and traditional social practices — through the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003). This recognition has further legitimised the ecomuseum approach, which has always considered intangible heritage as an inseparable part of territorial identity and collective memory, and has reinforced the complementarity between the international normative framework and the bottom-up enhancement practices promoted by Italian ecomuseums.

In summary, the European Landscape Convention provides ecomuseums not only with a normative reference framework, but with a genuinely integrated conceptual scheme — landscape as a relational construct, heritage as a collective process, governance as active participation — that coincides with the theoretical and operational foundations of the new museology. The implementation of the Convention could therefore significantly increase the diffusion and legitimation of ecomuseums as privileged instruments for the rediscovery of places, the recovery of the sense of dwelling and the renewal of care for the territory.

1.3 From the Temple-Museum to the Participatory Agora: the Role of New Ecomuseum Institutions

The debate on new museology finds in Fredi Drugman one of its principal animators on the theoretical and didactic level. Drugman interprets the vast movement of ideas that traversed international museology during the twentieth century, applying and disseminating it in the Italian context with an organic cultural proposal: transforming the museum from a "salon of the muses" into an agora, the public space par excellence, a gathering point for citizens, a home for the collective (Drugman, 2010). His proposal is not a simple reform of exhibition techniques, but a radical redefinition of the social function of the museum institution: against the unceasing advance of innovations and changes in ways of living, against the tendency to treat rapidly transforming anthropological cultures as residues of the past, Drugman argues that they should be considered "not relics, but the foundation of our cultural identity" (Drugman, 2010). This perspective is part of a broader international movement, which begins with the *Déclaration de Santiago du Chili* of 1972 — in which the museum is redefined as an instrument serving the integral social development of communities — and consolidates with the *Déclaration de Québec* of 1984, which enshrines the founding principles of new museology: social function,

interdisciplinary approach, community participation, the museum as a process rather than a building (MINOM, 1984; De Varine, 2017). Today, much of what Drugman and the theorists of new museology elaborated has entered the shared heritage of the discipline, translated into management practices and institutional norms. The very definition of museum adopted by ICOM in 2022 reflects this evolution: the museum is described therein as “a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage”, with the explicit purpose of “promoting diversity and sustainability” and “offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing” (ICOM, 2022). Compared to earlier definitions, striking is the introduction of active interpretive functions, the reference to sustainability and the recognition of intangible heritage as a legitimate object of museum care: all elements that ecomuseum practice had anticipated by decades.

In the landscape of institutions that have developed around the concept of the museum (museum systems, diffuse museums, open-air museums), the ecomuseum is distinguished by the specificity of its territorial and community anchoring (Pappalardo, 2020). With respect to the European Landscape Convention, with which it shares the fundamental principles discussed in the previous paragraph, the ecomuseum represents the operational device that translates those principles into concrete practices of enhancement, care and participation. Perhaps the most effective and widely shared definition in the Italian context is the one proposed by Maurizio Maggi in the volume *Ecomusei. Guida europea*, in which it is stated with essential clarity that the ecomuseum can be defined as “a pact by which a community commits itself to taking care of a territory” (Maggi, 2002:14). This definition precisely captures the relational and processual nature of the ecomuseum institution: not a building, not a collection, but a dynamic and continuously updated agreement between social subjects and lived space, which perfectly mirrors the contractual and participatory language of the Convention.

The objectives of the ecomuseum are articulated around two complementary strands, which emerged already in the first French experiences of the 1970s. The first strand — which Davis (1999) defines as the “environmental model” — is focused on the enhancement and active conservation of the natural environment and the built landscape. The second — definable as the “community model” (Van Geert, 2019) — is focused on social development, the strengthening of local identities and the promotion of forms of alternative and sustainable economy. In the most mature contemporary practice, these two strands tend to interweave inseparably: the care of landscape is simultaneously the care of community, and the enhancement of local identity is simultaneously the protection of the material and immaterial forms in which that identity has been deposited in the territory.

This duality of objectives produces significant typological richness. Italian ecomuseums surveyed over the past two decades — whose diffusion has experienced a marked acceleration since the ratification of the European Landscape Convention by Law 14/2006 — are distributed along a continuum ranging from rural and mountain realities centred on agricultural and craft memory, to post-industrial experiences in areas of long-standing industrialisation, through to urban and metropolitan experiments addressing the challenges of multiculturalism and social marginality (Maggi & Falletti, 2001). Since 2015, a new wave of ecomuseum foundations has been witnessed in metropolitan contexts, especially in the large cities of Southern Europe, which have chosen the ecomuseum model as a response to the challenges of spatial segregation and intercultural cohesion. In all these contexts, landscape heritage — understood in its broadest sense, both tangible and intangible, ordinary and extraordinary — constitutes the common ground on which the ecomuseum “pact” is built.

The present contribution aims to analyse to what extent and in what ways the ecomuseums — in its most evolved form, rooted in the tradition of new museology and consistent with the principles of the European Landscape Convention — can constitute an effective instrument for the implementation of those principles, with particular reference to the participatory dimension, the enhancement of local identity and the regeneration of peripheral territories. To this end, two significant Italian case studies are presented and compared, selected for the diversity of their physical, social and historical territorial contexts and for the richness of the experiences accumulated: the Ecomuseo Casilino in Rome (RM) and the Ecomuseo del Freidano in Settimo Torinese (TO).

The research is guided by two complementary questions.

The first question investigates the propositional dimension: can new ecomuseum institutions trigger forms of urban regeneration, ensure the protection of identity values and promote new forms of collective appropriation of diffuse cultural heritage? This question directs the analysis towards governance and enhancement models, and towards the capacity of ecomuseums to act as active devices for the construction of landscape heritage — not simple custodians of what exists, but promoters of social and cultural processes capable of regenerating the sense of place.

The second question introduces a necessary critical dimension: what criteria, territorial conditions and social and managerial processes can generate lasting social impacts without producing phenomena of gentrification or the exclusion of original communities? This question is particularly relevant in fragile or rapidly transforming urban contexts, where cultural enhancement can produce perverse effects — increases in property values, gentrification, folklorisation of local cultural practices — that contradict the principles of inclusivity and participation that inspire both the Convention and ecomuseum practice (Zukin, 2011; Herzfeld, 2009).

Research questions are situated at the intersection of three disciplinary fields in growing dialogue: landscape and territorial planning, participatory museology and studies on cultural heritage governance. They are structurally linked: the first opens a space of possibilities, the second delimits it with the analysis of risks. Together, they define the analytical perimeter of this contribution and its ambition: not merely to document Italian ecomuseum experiences, but to critically evaluate the conditions of their effectiveness and social justice, contributing to building a reference framework useful both for academic reflection and for the design of cultural and landscape policies.

The choice to compare two ecomuseums with structurally different characteristics — one urban and multicultural, the other post-industrial with a strong working-class identity — allows for testing the hypothesis that the ecomuseum model possesses sufficient adaptive flexibility to operate effectively in very different territorial and social contexts, without losing its own methodological coherence.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Methodological Approach

The methodological approach adopted for this research is based on an integrated and multidimensional analytical framework, developed to respond to the complex and processual nature of ecomuseum phenomena. The identification of innovative forms of ecomuseum for the territory is not a rigid and univocal process but reflects a continuously evolving field that expresses the changing role of the museum institution in contemporary society. The selected case studies are not limited to being containers of objects but take shape as active and dynamic actors for local development, social inclusion and the enhancement of heritage understood in the broadest sense. On the empirical research level, the analytical framework used aims to simultaneously re-read the physical, social and institutional dimensions of ecomuseum processes, starting from interpretive components articulated in four complementary analytical frameworks (Table 1), each organised in three columns:

1. the interpretive component, which identifies the thematic nodes constitutive of each framework;
2. the indicators, which operationally specify each component in variables verifiable in the field;
3. the sources and survey methods, which anchor each indicator to verifiable instruments and archives, making the framework directly usable in the research phase and in the drafting of urban planning instruments.

Table 1: Integrated analytical framework.

Analytical Framework	Interpretative component	Indicators	Sources / data collection methods
1. Typological and Spatial Relations	Location Spatial configuration Forms of adaptive reuse Reversibility and compatibility of use	• Position (historic centre, periphery, rural territory, industrial areas) • Museum structure: diffuse, punctual, reticulated, linear • Type of intervention: restoration, change of use, temporary installation, • Capacity of coexistence of uses • Degree of physical and functional invasiveness	• Urban cartography, land registry, aerial photographs, in-situ survey • morphological analysis, floor plan, Typological classification • Technical documentation of interventions • Comparative before/after assessment; regulatory compatibility check
2. Participatory Processes and Governance	Community-heritage relations Identity practices Actor mapping Forms of engagement	• Degree of heritage recognition • Sense of territorial belonging • Rituals, local knowledge, collective integrated into the ecomuseum project • Decision-making arena (public/private sector and associations) • Formal/informal roles in mapping and co-planning	• Ethnographic surveys, interviews, questionnaires, focus groups • Oral archives, historical photographic documentation, cultural repertoire • Stakeholder analysis, organisational charts, institutional agreements • Assembly minutes, process reports, digital participation platforms
3. Urban Planning Instruments	Conservation restrictions Planning regulations Rewards and tax incentives Regeneration tools	• Overlapping historical, landscape and environmental constraints • PRG/PUG Zoning: land use regulations, development quotas, and incentives • Building credits, transfer of development rights, regional contributions and European funds • Neighborhood contracts, PII, programme agreements, ecc.	• SIT regional/local, • National Heritage Geoportal • Current PRG, adopted variants, RUE/PGT; consistency check with higher-level instruments • Active tenders • Administrative acts, memoranda of understanding, monitoring
4. Impact Assessment	Cultural, social, economic and environmental impact Transformation of meanings New creative and narrative practices	• Changes in cultural and tourist flows • Social cohesion; property values • Reduction of impermeabilisation and land consumption • Recoding of places: from abandoned/residual space to place of active memory; semantic stratification • Site-specific artistic productions, community digital archives, urban storytelling, affective mappings	• SEA/EIA, ISTAT indices, OMI (Property Market Observatory), sustainability reports • Semiotic analysis, participant observation, biographical narratives of places • Production survey, local media analysis, cultural impact assessment

2.2 Typological and Spatial Relations: the Configuration of the Territory as Text

The first framework concerns the morphological and locational dimension of ecomuseum heritage and aims to capture the variety of spatial configurations through which ecomuseums are structured in the territory. The interpretive components investigated are: the location, which specifies the positioning of the ecomuseum facility with respect to the urban and territorial structure (historic centre, consolidated periphery, rural territory, disused industrial areas); the spatial configuration, which classifies the museum structure according to the typologies of diffuse, punctual, reticulated and linear (Norberg-Schulz, 1980; Choay, 1992); the forms of adaptive reuse, which document the type of intervention carried out (conservative restoration, change of use, temporary installation); and reversibility and compatibility of use, which assess the capacity of the ecomuseum project to coexist with previous uses and its physical and functional invasiveness. On the methodological level, the survey of this framework makes use of urban cartography, land registry and aerial photographs, integrated with morphological analysis, floor plans and typological classification of spaces, as well as comparative before/after assessments of the interventions carried out and checks on regulatory compatibility.

The spatial approach to the territorial networks of ecomuseums is part of a consolidated tradition of urban studies on diffuse heritage, which recognises in the territory itself — and not in the individual building or collection — the analytical unit of reference. The morphological reading of heritage in a network key makes it possible to identify the physical and functional connections between the nodes of the ecomuseum system, highlighting the potential for integration with the infrastructural, ecological and cultural networks of the territory. Similarly, Magnaghi (2010) underlines how the enhancement of local heritage requires a structural reading of the territory that captures the stratification of relations between settlement, landscape and social practices over the long period — a reading that the proposed analytical framework seeks to operationalise through the indicators of spatial configuration and adaptive reuse.

2.3 Participatory Processes and Governance: Identity Practices and Community Rooting

The second framework shifts attention from the physical to the social and relational dimension, investigating the ways in which local communities identify with the ecomuseum project and actively participate in it. The four interpretive components are: heritage-community relations, measured through the degree of community recognition of heritage and the sense of territorial belonging; identity practices, which survey the rituals, local knowledge, oral traditions and collective memory integrated into the project; actor mapping, which classifies the typology of subjects involved (public bodies, associations, private individuals, schools, diaspora communities) and analyses their formal and informal roles; forms of engagement, which distinguish between co-design, participatory mapping, neighbourhood workshops and collaboration pacts. The preferred sources for this framework are ethnographic surveys, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, oral archives, historical photographic documentation and digital participation platforms, integrated with stakeholder analysis, institutional organisational charts and assembly minutes and process reports (Tsipra, Drinia, 2022). This framework is inscribed in the theoretical debate on participatory governance of heritage, in which the community is simultaneously the subject, object and beneficiary of cultural action (De Varine, 2017). Social cohesion is not a structural datum, but a process that is constructed through shared practices of recognition and care of common goods. In this perspective, the forms of ecomuseum engagement — from collaboration pacts to participatory mapping — are not simple consultation techniques, but devices through which the collective sense of belonging to the territory is negotiated and renewed (Ostrom, 1990; Sennett, 2013).

2.4 Urban Planning Tools: the Planning Framework as Both a Resource and a Constraint

The third framework analyses the relationship between the ecomuseum project and the normative and planning system in which it is embedded, investigating both the constraints that condition action and the opportunities offered by existing instruments. The interpretive components concern: heritage protection constraints (overlapping historical, landscape and environmental constraints under Legislative Decree 42/2004 and regional landscape plans); urban planning regimes (PRG/PUG zoning, permitted land uses, building indices and Technical Implementation Standards); incentives and fiscal benefits [building credits, transfer of development rights, regional contributions and European funds (PNRR, ERDF, Urban Agenda)]; and regeneration instruments (neighbourhood contracts, integrated programmes, programme agreements, PINQuA). The survey sources include regional and municipal geographic information systems, the MIC National Heritage Geoportal, existing General Land Use Plans with their adopted variants, Urban Building Regulations and Land Governance Plans, active tenders and municipal and regional resolutions, as well as administrative acts and memoranda of understanding. The link between urban planning and ecomuseum heritage enhancement underlines how the rigidity of traditional zoning often constitutes a structural obstacle to the forms of adaptive and multifunctional reuse that characterise ecomuseum facilities. The recent season of urban regeneration programmes — from PINQuA to PNRR funds — has opened new windows of opportunity but requires ecomuseums to develop design and administrative competences that are not always part of their cultural DNA (De Rossi & Mascino, 2020). The proposed analytical framework thus also serves to identify the points of friction between the institutional logics of planning and the more fluid and processual logics of ecomuseum practice.

2.5 Impact Assessment: Measuring Transformation After the Project

The fourth framework addresses the question of evaluating the effects produced by the ecomuseum project in its cultural, social, economic and environmental dimensions. The three interpretive components are: multidimensional impacts, measured through quantitative variables such as changes in cultural and tourist flows, ISTAT social cohesion indices, OMI property values and indicators of land consumption and impermeabilisation; the transformation of meanings, investigated through semiotic analysis and participant observation, to document the recoding of places from abandoned or residual spaces into places of active memory and semantic stratification; and new creative and narrative practices, surveyed through site-specific artistic productions, community digital archives, urban storytelling and affective mappings. The preferred survey instruments include SEA/EIA, sustainability reports, Cultural Impact Assessment (CIA), biographical narratives of places and analysis of local media. The evaluation of ecomuseum impacts constitutes one of the most open methodological nodes in the sector literature. As Nocca (2017) and Throsby (2012) observe, the specificity of cultural heritage as a good of multiple value — economic, symbolic, identity-related, ecological — requires assessment instruments capable of capturing this complexity without reducing it to merely economic indicators. The CIA, developed in the Australian context and progressively adopted in Europe, represents in this sense a promising instrument, as it integrates quantitative and qualitative dimensions and incorporates the perspective of local communities as a legitimate criterion of judgement (Deacon et al., 2004).

The integration of the four analytical frameworks configures a complex but necessary methodological approach, capable of capturing the richness and specificity of each ecomuseum experience without renouncing the possibility of systematic comparison and the definition of replicable reference models. The data collection made use of a mixed system of sources: documentary analysis (urban plans, ecomuseum statutes, annual reports), participant observation, semi-structured

interviews with managers and communities, and analysis of the literature produced by ecomuseum institutions.

2.6 Selection of Case Studies

The selection of case studies adopts a qualitative comparative approach (Fig. 1), grounded in the multiple case study method according to the established tradition of Yin (2014) and Stake (1995). This methodological choice is motivated by the very nature of the research object: ecomuseum processes are contextual phenomena, processually complex and difficult to reduce to isolated variables, and therefore require analytical instruments capable of capturing the density of relations between actors, spaces, practices and institutions. It is precisely this tension between generalisability and contextual specificity that makes the comparative case study method the most appropriate instrument for the study of complex institutional phenomena. The comparison between two structurally different cases — rather than the study of a single case — makes it possible to distinguish between idiosyncratic elements, tied to the specificity of each context, and structural elements, potentially generalisable to a broader family of ecomuseum experiences (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The selection did not follow criteria of statistical representativeness, but of purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002): the cases were chosen because they exemplify, in a particularly clear and contrasting manner, the variety of territorial, social and institutional conditions in which the ecomuseum model finds itself operating in Italy today. This logic is consistent with the objective of the research, which does not aim at statistical generalisation but at analytical generalisation (Yin, 2014): not “how many ecomuseums behave in this way”, but “under what conditions and through what mechanisms does the ecomuseum approach produce certain effects”. The cases were identified and catalogued starting from an analysis of the national network of Italian ecomuseums, with reference to available regional censuses and the mapping promoted by the Permanent Observatory of Italian Ecomuseums (Maggi & Falletti, 2001). The analysis made it possible to identify certain thematic focuses that represent the variety of contemporary approaches to the enhancement and management of diffuse cultural heritage: from rural and mountain experiences centred on agricultural memory, to post-industrial experiments, through to urban and metropolitan realities addressing the challenges of multiculturalism and social fragmentation.

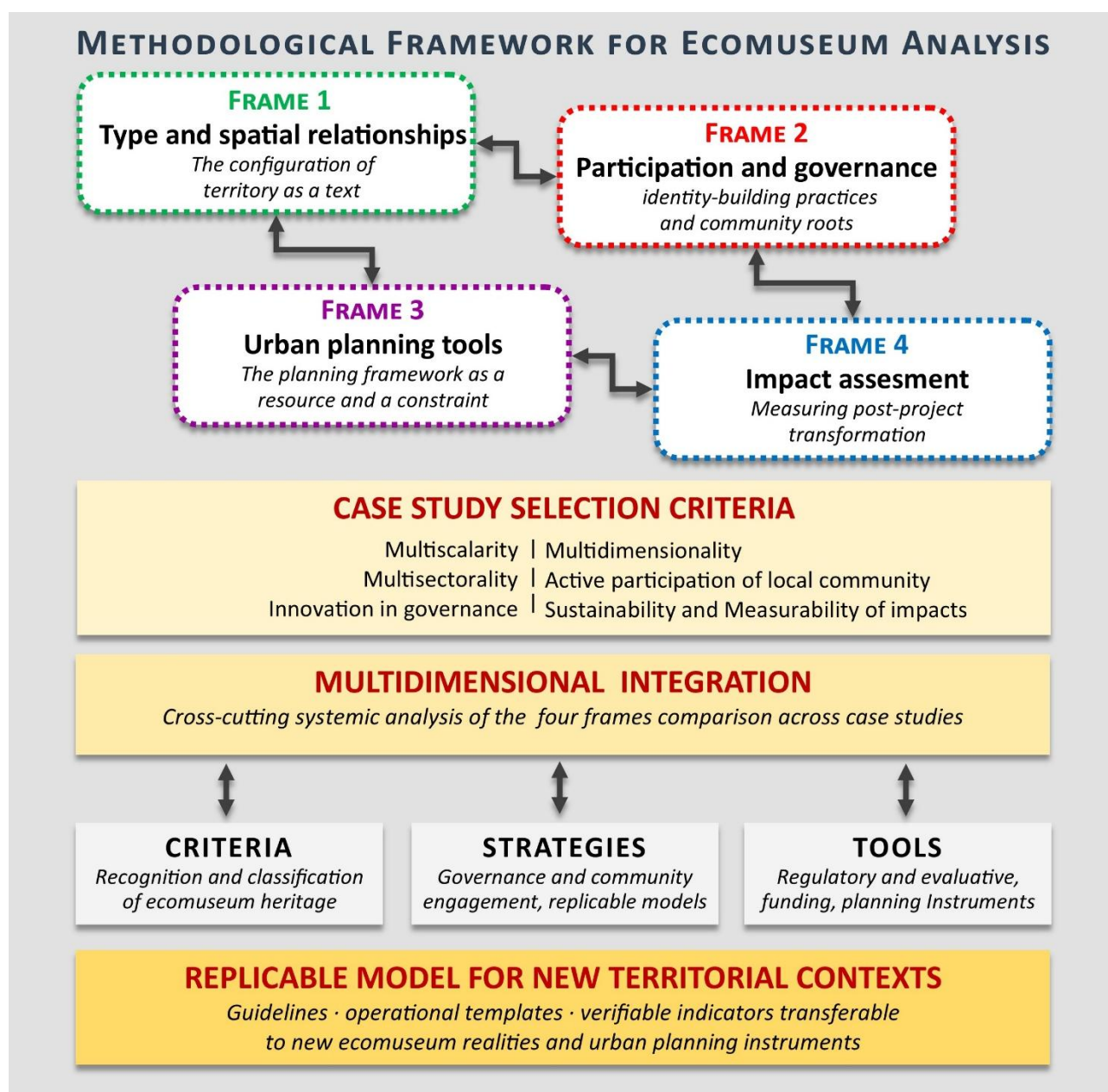


Figure 1. Summary diagram of the proposed analytical methodology (developed by authors).

The selection of cases was guided by six complementary criteria, defined in accordance with the analytical framework presented in the previous section and with the research questions formulated in paragraph 1.3. The first criterion is multiscalarity: the selected cases present a diffuse cultural heritage articulated at different scales, from the individual artefact to the territorial system, making it possible to analyse the relations between the different components of the ecomuseum network and their rooting in the broader urban and landscape context (Magnaghi, 2010). The second criterion is multidimensionality: the interventions analysed simultaneously integrate physical, social, economic and cultural aspects, enabling the application of the four-framework analytical structure proposed in Table 1 and the verification of its capacity to capture the complexity of real processes (Throsby, 2012). The third criterion is multisectorality: both cases present forms of coordination between distinct disciplinary and institutional spheres (urban planning, museology, social services, local economy, environmental policies) whose analysis makes it possible to evaluate the adopted inter-institutional governance models and their critical aspects. The fourth criterion is the active participation of the local community and stakeholders: the selected cases are distinguished by the presence of documented community engagement practices (co-design, participatory mappings, collaboration pacts) that allow for an in-depth analysis of the participatory dimension of ecomuseum action, central both to the European Landscape Convention and to the tradition of new museology (De Varine, 2017; Council of Europe, 2000). The fifth criterion is innovation in governance: both cases present management and coordination models that have sought, with different outcomes, to overcome ordinary institutional fragmentation, experimenting with forms of public-private-civic partnership that recent literature identifies as a necessary condition for the durability of ecomuseum impacts (Bagnasco, 2003; Ostrom, 1990). The sixth criterion is the sustainability and measurability of impacts over time: the selected cases have a sufficiently consolidated project history to allow for an evaluation not only of intentions but of the effects produced, according to the dimensions indicated in Framework 4 of the analytical framework. This criterion oriented the preference towards experiences with at least a decade of documented activity, excluding realities too recent to permit a reading of medium-term impacts (Nocca, 2017).

This contribution therefore analyses two Italian experiences in radically different territorial contexts. The Ecomuseo Casilino in Rome (RM) operates in a socially fragmented urban landscape, recovering neighborhood memories and traces of peri-urban rurality in one of the densest and most complex metropolitan quarters of the capital. The Ecomuseo del Freidano in Settimo Torinese (TO) enhances the industrial and fluvial landscape of the Turin metropolitan belt, interweaving working-class identity, manufacturing heritage and local biodiversity in a context of profound post-Fordist transformation. Their comparison makes it possible to highlight, at the same time, the structural potential of the ecomuseum as a mediation device between community and territory — applicable to different contexts — and the need for contextual adaptation of operational strategies to the specific characteristics of each place.

2.7 Ecomuseo Casilino of Rome

2.7.1 Territorial Context

The Ecomuseo Casilino (Fig. 2) is situated in the eastern quadrant of Rome, in one of the peripheral areas of the capital characterised by the greatest complexity and historical stratification. The reference territory encompasses the neighbourhoods that arose along the Via Casilina (one of the most ancient of Rome's road arteries, coinciding with the ancient Via Labicana) and includes a notable variety of overlapping landscapes: the remains of the peri-urban rural fabric that characterised this strip of the Roman countryside until the post-Second World War years; the borgate built during the Fascist period and during the rapid post-war urbanisation; the public housing districts of the 1960s and 1970s; and the more recent areas of spontaneous settlement that have colonised the margins of the consolidated settlement system.

The landscape of this territory is therefore the product of very different historical strata, which have overlapped without ever entirely erasing one another: from the agricultural countryside with its farmsteads and rural buildings — many of which are still recognisable in the built fabric — to the working-class borgate, from equipped parks to disused industrial zones, through to the great road axes that mark the rhythm of diffuse urbanisation. It is a landscape that bears inscribed in its physical forms the economic and social transformations of an entire season of Italian modernisation, with its contradictions and its latent resources.

2.7.2 Genesis and Structure of the Ecomuseum

The Ecomuseo Casilino was born in the early 2000s from the initiative of a group of citizens, cultural associations and social workers from the neighbourhood, who progressively formed a network around the shared awareness of the identity value of local heritage and the risk of its progressive dispersal and oblivion. The process of formal constitution was long and not without difficulties, requiring a continuous negotiation between the different components of the community — the historic residents of the borgate, new generations, immigrants of diverse origins — and local public institutions (the Municipality of Rome, the Fifth Municipal District), with which the Ecomuseum gradually built a relationship of structured collaboration (De Varine, 2005).

The structure of the Ecomuseum is articulated around a system of places of memory and cultural practices distributed across the territory, without a single physical seat functioning as a traditional exhibition centre. The “cells” of the Ecomuseum — to use the typically ecomuseum terminology — include: surviving Roman rural buildings and their system of agricultural outbuildings; the remains of historical borgate with their vernacular architectures; parks and green areas that preserve traces of the pre-urban Roman countryside; and the places of associative life and oral memory of the settled communities. Around these physical places the main activities of the Ecomuseum have developed: participatory historical research, the collection of life stories and archive photographs, educational workshops in schools, guided tour itineraries, community festivals and craft markets.

2.7.3 Participatory Dimension and Plural Identity

One of the most significant aspects of the Ecomuseo Casilino is its capacity to engage with the identity complexity of a plural and multicultural territory. The Roman periphery is not inhabited by a homogeneous community with a shared tradition, but by populations of very diverse origins — Romans of ancient settlement, people from other Italian regions in the decades of internal migration, and more recently foreign communities of multiple origins — who carry with them memories, cultural practices and representations of space that are profoundly differentiated. The Ecomuseum has chosen to make this plurality a resource rather than an obstacle, developing participatory methodologies capable of enhancing the different identity trajectories without flattening them into a unified and homogenising narrative.

The participatory memory workshops — in which residents of different generations and origins are invited to share memories, photographs, objects and stories linked to the places of the neighbourhood — have produced an oral and visual archive of great richness, which today represents one of the most precious documentary resources of the Ecomuseum. In parallel, educational activities in neighbourhood schools have made it possible to involve new generations in a process of rediscovery of local history that has contributed to building a sense of territorial belonging even in children and young people of non-Italian origin, for whom local heritage had not been transmitted through family channels.



Figure 2. Ecomuseo Casilino of Rome (RM).

2.8 Ecomuseo del Freidano of Settimo Torinese

2.8.1 Territorial Context

The Ecomuseo del Freidano of Settimo Torinese (Fig. 3), a municipality in the first metropolitan belt of Turin, is situated in a territory that has experienced in paradigmatic fashion the transformations of Italian industrialisation in the second half of the twentieth century and the subsequent crises of deindustrialisation. The name of the Ecomuseum refers to the Freidano stream, one of the minor watercourses that flow through the municipal territory before joining the Po, and which constitutes the backbone of the landscape and natural system of the area (Settis, 2010).

The reference territory of the Ecomuseum is characterised by the coexistence of three distinct but closely interconnected landscape systems: the industrial landscape, with its factories — some still active, others disused or in the process of reconversion — that have profoundly marked the settlement morphology and social identity of Settimo since the years of the «economic miracle»; the fluvial and natural landscape, along the banks of the Freidano and in the area of the wetlands and woodland that develop alongside the watercourse; and the residual agricultural landscape, constituted by the cultivated fields that survive in the peri-urban countryside as a testimony to the pre-industrial productive vocations of the territory (Dematteis, 1995).

2.8.2 Genesis and Structure of the Ecomuseum

The Ecomuseo del Freidano was founded in 2006, in connection with Piedmontese regional policies for the development of the ecomuseum system which, starting from Regional Law 31/1995 — the first Italian regional law on ecomuseums — had favoured the proliferation of ecomuseum experiences across the entire Piedmontese territory. The initiative developed from an agreement between the Municipality of Settimo Torinese, several local cultural associations and a group of former industrial workers particularly motivated to safeguard the memory of factory work, which risked disappearing with the progressive closure of production plants (Maggi, 2002).

The structure of the Ecomuseo del Freidano is articulated in three main components, corresponding to the three landscape systems of the territory: the Museo della Manifattura (Manufacturing Museum), which collects machinery, documents and oral testimonies linked to the industrial history of Settimo, with particular attention to the textile and chemical industries that characterised local productive development; the Freidano park, a natural equipped park that develops along the course of the stream and combines ecological, recreational and educational functions; and the Rete dei Saperi Agricoli (Network of Agricultural Knowledge), which enhances the traditional agronomic knowledge and practices that have survived in the peri-urban countryside through educational gardens, farm visit itineraries and food education initiatives (Montella, 2009).

2.8.3 Working-Class Identity, Biodiversity and Post-Industrial Regeneration

The most original contribution of the Ecomuseo del Freidano consists in its capacity to interweave identity and landscape dimensions that tend ordinarily to be treated separately: the memory of industrial labour, the enhancement of local biodiversity and the regeneration of post-industrial areas. The starting point was the recognition that the working-class identity of the Settimo community — built over decades of hard work in the factories of the Turin belt, of trade union struggles and collective culture — constitutes an identity resource of extraordinary value, destined to disappear if its tangible and intangible testimonies were not preserved (De Varine, 2005).

The labour memory workshops, organised with the participation of former workers from the main local factories, produced an archive of oral testimonies and documentary materials of great historical and anthropological interest. In parallel, the naturalistic research activities conducted in the Freidano park revealed an unexpected biological richness in a strongly industrialised context, making it possible to construct a narrative of the territory that surpassed the traditional opposition between nature and industry to propose instead a narrative of coexistence and co-evolution between the two systems.



Figure 3. Ecomuseo del Freidano of Settimo Torinese (TO).

3. Results

The comparative analysis of the two case studies, conducted through the four analytical frameworks described in the methodological section, has produced articulated and significant results, which will be presented below according to a structure that follows the order of the frameworks themselves (Table 2).

3.1 Typological and Spatial Relations: Diffuse Heritage and Networks of Places

Both case studies confirm the fundamentally network-like nature of contemporary ecomuseums, which are not structured around a single exhibition pole but through a network of significant places distributed across the territory (Belliggiano et al. 2021). This spatial configuration, which might initially seem a structural weakness (insofar as the dispersion of attractions makes communication and fruition more difficult) proves in reality to be one of the principal identity resources of the ecomuseum approach: it makes it possible to enhance the territory in its totality, resisting the logic of the “box museum” that concentrates heritage in a single container and tends inevitably to separate it from the living context from which it originates.

In the case of the Ecomuseo Casilino, the network of places includes historic rural buildings, borgate, parks and association premises distributed along an axis of approximately eight kilometres, connected by thematic itineraries that allow for the reading of the different historical stratifications of the Roman peri-urban landscape. The analysis of spatial configuration reveals how the principal result of ecomuseum action was not the creation of new structures, but the resignification of pre-existing places through practices of naming, narration and community use that transformed them from anonymous spaces into recognisable and frequented “places of memory”.

In the case of the Ecomuseo del Freidano, the network is organised around three main poles — the Museo della Manifattura, the river Park and the Network of gardens — connected by cycle-pedestrian paths and by an interpretive signage system that allows visitors to read the three landscape systems as parts of a single territorial narrative. A particularly significant result was the recovery of some disused areas along the course of the Freidano, transformed from zones of abandonment and degradation into spaces of collective fruition and environmental education, with a positive impact on the quality of landscape as perceived by inhabitants and on urban safety.

Table 2. Comparative matrix of results by analytical framework.

Analytical Framework	Ecomuseo Casilino (Rome)	Ecomuseo del Freidano (Settimo Torinese)
1. Typological and Spatial Relations	Dense and fragmented urban landscape; borgata buildings, residual peri-urban rural areas, spontaneous building fabric of the Roman periphery	Peri-urban and fluvial territory; former disused industrial structures along the Freidano river; residual agricultural landscape of the Turin belt
2. Participatory Processes and Governance	Recovery of borgata memories; participatory workshops; involvement of local associations, schools, migrants; plural and multi-ethnic identity	Participation of former industrial workers; environmental associations; network of local subjects for the enhancement of working-class and naturalistic identity
3. Urban Planning Instruments	General Land Use Plan of Rome; landscape constraints under Legislative Decree 42/2004; peripheral urban regeneration programmes; programme agreements	General Land Use Plan of Settimo Torinese; productive-use areas being decommissioned; regional programmes for industrial reconversion; instruments for environmental enhancement
4. Impact Assessment	Strengthening of peripheral identity; reduction of social isolation; activation of proximity networks; recovery of rural and craft memories	Enhancement of industrial heritage; environmental education; development of slow cultural tourism; conservation of local biodiversity

3.2 Participatory Governance: Models and Tensions

On the governance level, the two case studies present significantly differentiated organisational models, which reflect the different characteristics of the territorial contexts and reference communities.

The Ecomuseo Casilino has developed a governance model strongly rooted in neighbourhood associative networks, with a horizontal and flexible organisational structure that values the informal competences of active citizens and maintains close continuity with the practices of mutual aid and community solidarity that historically characterise the Roman borgate. The weakness of this model lies in its vulnerability to the loss of key individuals and in the difficulty of guaranteeing continuity over time in the face of the turnover of the people involved.

The Ecomuseo del Freidano, on the other hand, has adopted a more institutionalised model, based on a convention between the Municipality of Settimo Torinese and the main local cultural associations, which guarantees greater stability of resources and a more solid legal basis for ecomuseum action. This model has favoured the development of medium-to-long-term project capacity and has made it possible to access European and regional funding that has supported structural interventions of some significance. The risk, in this case, is the progressive bureaucratisation of the participatory process, with the tendency to reduce community participation to formal moments of consultation rather than to genuine co-design processes. In both cases, the involvement of schools proved to be one of the most effective instruments for broadening the participatory base of the Ecomuseum and for transmitting to new generations the sense of belonging to local heritage. The educational workshops, photographic competitions and participatory historical research itineraries conducted with compulsory school classes produced not only valuable documentary materials, but above all new bonds between children, young people and territory, building the conditions for a more informed and motivated future participation.

3.3 Urban Planning Instruments: Opportunities and Constraints

The analysis of urban planning instruments reveals how both ecomuseums had to operate in a normative context that did not envisage — and in part still does not envisage — instruments specifically dedicated to the enhancement of diffuse cultural heritage of the ecomuseum type.

In the case of the Ecomuseo Casilino, the General Land Use Plan of the Municipality of Rome recognises some of the areas of historical-landscape interest included within the Ecomuseo Casilino's perimeter through protection constraints under Legislative Decree 42/2004, but does not provide specific mechanisms to support ecomuseum activities or to favour the involvement of private actors in the enhancement of diffuse heritage. The Ecomuseum has therefore had to act primarily through informal agreements with property owners and public institutions, in a context of legal uncertainty that has limited the possibility of structural investments.

In the case of the Ecomuseo del Freidano, the presence of a specific regional law on ecomuseums (Piedmont Regional Law no. 31/1995, subsequently renewed) provided a more favourable institutional framework, allowing the Ecomuseo del Freidano to obtain formal recognition and access to dedicated funding lines. However, the analysis reveals how even in this case the ordinary urban planning instruments — General Land Use Plans, implementation plans, building regulations — have not yet been adequately updated to incorporate the enhancement and fruition needs of ecomuseum spaces, with consequent difficulties in the management of disused areas and in the creation of visitor service infrastructure.

3.4 Impact Assessment: Multidimensional Reading

The impact assessment of the two ecomuseums produces an overall positive picture, with some significant differences linked to the different reference contexts. On the cultural level, both cases highlight a significant transformation in the meanings attributed by residents to local heritage: places previously perceived as residual, degraded or simply “anonymous” have been converted into positive identity elements and narrative resources for the construction of community belonging. This effect of “positive resignification” of the territory is particularly evident in the case of the Ecomuseo Casilino, where the “Borgata” — long associated with an image of marginality and social inferiority — has been recovered as a place of memory and identity pride through ecomuseum work.

On the social level, both ecomuseums have contributed to strengthening proximity networks and reducing the isolation of sections of the population particularly exposed to dynamics of exclusion: elderly people bearing precious historical memories but at risk of marginalisation, migrants seeking recognition and forms of integration respectful of their own cultural identity, young people in search of meaning and belonging in urban contexts often perceived as alien or hostile. The Ecomuseum proved, in both cases, to be a space of intergenerational and intercultural encounter of extraordinary effectiveness, capable of producing social cohesion through the mediation of shared heritage (Pavlis, 2024).

Economic impacts have been more limited and more difficult to measure, but nonetheless detectable. In the case of the Freidano, the development of slow cultural tourism — hikers, cycle tourists, school groups on visits — has generated a modest but significant economic spin-off for local accommodation facilities and restaurants. In the case of the Casilino, the direct economic impact has been more contained, but the Ecomuseum has played an important role as a catalyst for the activation of proximity economies — craft markets, solidarity purchasing groups, creative workshops — that have contributed to revitalising the local economic fabric.



Figure 4. Ecomuseums offer the opportunity to develop activities and events with the local community and for tourism purposes. Top: Freidano Ecomuseum in Settimo Torinese; bottom: Casilino Ecomuseum.

4. Discussion

The results presented in the previous section allow for some interpretive reflections that bring the two case studies into dialogue with the theoretical reference framework and with the research questions formulated in the introduction.

4.1 The Ecomuseum as a Device for the implementation of the European Landscape Convention

The analysis has revealed a close convergence between the principles of the European Landscape Convention and the practices of the ecomuseums analysed. In both cases, ecomuseum action has produced results consistent with the three great objectives of the Convention: the recognition of landscape as common heritage, its enhancement as a quality “living environment” for all populations, and its promotion as a sustainable economic and social resource. This convergence is not coincidental but reflects the common origin of both approaches in a tradition of thought that values the participatory and community dimension of heritage, in contrast to traditional top-down protection models based on exceptionality and the separation between experts and citizens. In this sense, the ecomuseum can be proposed as one of the privileged instruments for the concrete implementation of the Convention’s principles on the territory, especially in peripheral contexts and in areas characterised by diffuse heritage that struggles to find recognition and resources in traditional cultural heritage protection systems. The specificity of the ecomuseum approach — community rootedness, the enhancement of ordinary heritage, attention to intangible knowledge and practices — makes it particularly suited to operating in the “everyday landscapes” that the Convention explicitly recognises as worthy of protection and enhancement.

4.2 Towards a Participatory Governance of Landscape Heritage

In 2018, on the occasion of the European Year of Cultural Heritage, it was stated that heritage in Europe was undervalued relative to its potential in creating value, skills, employment and quality of life, because it lacked sustainable governance, understood as “participatory, multi-level governance and enhanced cross-sector cooperation” (European Commission, 2018). This statement retains its relevance intact: traditional models of cultural heritage management, often centralised and vertical, struggle to keep pace with the complexity of social, economic and environmental dynamics, as well as with the growing expectations of participation and transparency on the part of local communities (Benadusi, 2024). In this sense, territorial cultural networks and ecomuseums can represent a fundamental instrument in defining a strategic approach to heritage management, whose effectiveness depends on the capacity to respond to the challenges and opportunities of regeneration and on a delicate balance between the institutional dimension and respect for local

specificities. The first challenge concerns sustainability in combining the economic, social and environmental dimension with approaches that privilege quality over quantity, community participation over passive consumption, territorial regeneration over mere tourist promotion (Montella, 2009). A second challenge concerns the growing integration between territorial cultural heritage and digital technologies, as an instrument for defining unprecedented scenarios for enhancement and fruition beyond traditional geographical boundaries (Badia, et al. 2021). The digitalisation of cultural heritage should not represent a process of dematerialisation but configure new modalities of construction and transmission of territorial identity through collaborative platforms and augmented reality instruments that allow historical narrative and contemporary experience to be superimposed. However, digitalisation must be accompanied by policies for strengthening the competences of local cultural operators to avoid the risk of accentuating existing territorial disparities.

5. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the Casilino Ecomuseum in Rome and the Freidano Ecomuseum in Settimo Torinese, conducted through the four-dimensional analytical framework developed in this study, yields findings that respond directly to the two research questions formulated in the introduction.

With regard to the first question — whether new ecomuseum institutions can trigger forms of urban regeneration, protect identity values and promote new forms of collective belonging — both case studies provide a substantially affirmative answer. Despite their structural differences in governance model, territorial context and institutional embeddedness, both ecomuseums have produced measurable effects: the strengthening of proximity networks and inter-generational and inter-ethnic community bonds in Rome; the recovery of working-class memory and the enhancement of residual biodiversity in Settimo Torinese. In both cases, the ecomuseum has functioned as a territorial device for the implementation of the European Landscape Convention, translating its processual and democratic conception of landscape heritage into concrete bottom-up practices.

With regard to the second question — what criteria, territorial conditions and social and managerial processes generate lasting social impact without producing phenomena of aestheticisation or gentrification — the analysis indicates that the decisive factors are: the depth of community rootedness in the participatory processes; the capacity to engage with the normative system of urban planning instruments; and the adoption of flexible, multi-actor governance models capable of absorbing institutional changes without losing their territorial anchorage.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the literature on participatory museology and cultural heritage governance by proposing an integrated and replicable analytical framework that combines spatial, social, normative and evaluative dimensions. From a policy standpoint, the two cases demonstrate the potential — and the current limits — of ecomuseums as instruments of territorial planning, highlighting the need for dedicated normative tools and for greater integration between heritage management and urban regeneration policies.

The prospects of ecomuseums are taking shape within scenarios characterised by growing complexity, where the integration between the local and global dimension becomes a discriminating element for the success of cultural development strategies (Throsby, 2010). The transition towards these scenarios requires the definition of adequate normative instruments and dedicated resources, oriented towards place-based approaches that recognise territorial specificities and promote integrated forms of governance. But it also requires, perhaps above all, a profound cultural change in the ways of conceiving and practising heritage management. It is essentially a matter of moving from a vision of heritage as a “treasure to be protected” — conserved in specialised institutions, enjoyed by selected publics, governed by experts — to a dynamic conception that interprets it as an implementable and resilient “generative network”, capable of triggering levers of development and social cohesion (Settis, 2010). The ecomuseum, in its most evolved form, is already today one of the places in which this transition is taking place (Badia, Donato, 2023).: Strengthening its networks, equipping it with adequate normative instruments, and disseminating its culture: these are the principal challenges that the cultural heritage enhancement system is called upon to face in the coming years, if it wishes to be equal to the demands for meaning, belonging and future that local communities express with ever greater force and awareness.

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