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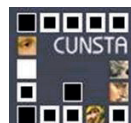
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# Cultural institutions facing the challenge of sustainability: from theory to practice. An introduction

Elena Borin\*, Mara Cerquetti\*\*,  
Leticia Labaronne\*\*\*

## *Abstract*

In this special issue, we aim to deepen our understanding of how, and to what extent, sustainability is integrated into the strategic planning as well as social and sustainability reporting practices of cultural institutions. The challenges of assessing the work of cultural organizations through alternative lenses, such as social value, have long been discussed in the cultural management literature. Yet, the topic has gained renewed urgency as the cultural sector is increasingly called to take responsibility for the sustainable transition.

\* Full professor in Business Administration, Co-Director ObSARC – Observatory on Sustainability Accounting and Reporting Practices in Cultural and Creative Ecosystems, Pegaso Digital University, Department of Management and Economics, Centro Direzionale Isola F2, 80132 Napoli, Italy, e-mail: elena.borin@unipegaso.it.

\*\* Associate professor in Management, University of Macerata, Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism, piazzale Bertelli 1, 62100 Macerata, Italy, e-mail: mara.cerquetti@unimc.it.

\*\*\* Full professor in Arts Management, Head of Center for Arts Management, ZHAW Zurich University of Applied Sciences, School of Management and Law, Gertrudstrasse 8, 8400 Winterthur, Switzerland, e-mail: leticia.labaronne@zhaw.ch.

The contributions collected here explore sustainability in the cultural field from multiple disciplinary perspectives, including management, museum studies, and geography. They draw on a range of methodological approaches, including literature reviews, theoretical overviews, conceptual and empirical analyses, and case studies.

In questo numero speciale intendiamo approfondire la comprensione di come, e in quale misura, la sostenibilità sia integrata nella pianificazione strategica e nelle pratiche di rendicontazione sociale e di sostenibilità delle istituzioni culturali. Le sfide legate alla valutazione del lavoro delle organizzazioni culturali attraverso lenti alternative – come il valore sociale – sono da tempo oggetto di discussione nella letteratura di management culturale. Tuttavia, la questione assume oggi una rinnovata urgenza, poiché al settore culturale è sempre più richiesto di assumersi la responsabilità della transizione sostenibile. I contributi raccolti in questo volume esplorano la sostenibilità in ambito culturale da prospettive disciplinari diverse, tra cui il management, i *museum studies* e la geografia, adottando un'ampia gamma di approcci metodologici, che spaziano dalle revisioni della letteratura alle rassegne teoriche, dalle analisi concettuali ed empiriche fino agli studi di caso.

### 1. *Launching a call for papers on sustainability in cultural institutions*

Nowadays, although still contested by some, culture is widely considered an essential component of sustainable development<sup>1</sup> and can be interpreted as the fourth pillar of sustainability (Culture *in* Sustainability), as a point of convergence, mediating between the three traditional pillars (Culture *for* Sustainability), as a center point for the other pillars of sustainability, so «an overarching dimension of sustainability»<sup>2</sup> (Culture *as* Sustainability).

Although cultural topics are not specified in any of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) declared by the United Nations, as approved by the UN General Assembly on 25 September 2015, they have been identified as underlying and transversal themes. Explicitly, they are referred to only in subobjective 4.7 of objective 4, “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”, which refers to promoting a peaceful and non-violent culture in addition to valorizing cultural diversity and the contribution of culture to sustainable development<sup>3</sup>. Cultural heritage is also explicitly mentioned in subobjective 11.4, “Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage.” In light of this, and to capture the relationship between culture and sustainability better, UNESCO provided 22 thematic indicators for culture (*Culture2030 Indicators*) in 2019, aiming to measure and monitor the contribution of culture to

<sup>1</sup> Cicerchia 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Soini, Dessein 2016, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Donato 2021.

the national and local implementation of the Objectives and Targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>4</sup>. The thematic indicators are divided into four areas: environment and resilience, prosperity and livelihoods, knowledge and skills, and inclusion and participation.

Alongside this landmark in the identification of measurement criteria, several projects, organizations, and studies have proposed frameworks for sustainability measurement and reporting that adequately demonstrate the contribution of culture to sustainable development<sup>5</sup>. These frameworks often focus on the social and cultural dimensions of sustainability or the local impact on territories and communities. This has resulted in a plethora of proposals, leading to a fragmented environment and a lack of comparability among the different impact-related data, as well as sustainability and social reports.

Cultural heritage institutions, such as museums, libraries, and archives, certainly play a privileged role in the debate on the relationship between culture and sustainability. Indeed, sustainability is intrinsically embedded in their mission, rooted in their long-lasting nature as permanent institutions and in the need to serve current and future generations<sup>6</sup>. Particularly in the museum sector, this issue has acquired growing importance. The ICOM included a double reference to sustainability in the new definition of museum approved in Prague on 24 August 2022 – explicit, through reference to its promotion, and implicit by emphasizing its social dimension, when museums are recognized as accessible and inclusive institutions that «operate and communicate ethically and professionally and with the participation of communities»<sup>7</sup>.

For this reason, it is unsurprising that activists have identified museums as a prominent place for their protests about climate change. According to the ICOM, this choice demonstrates a museum's «symbolic power and relevance in the discussions around the climate emergency»<sup>8</sup>. Among sustainability dimensions, environmental issues stand out as one of the most urgent needs, calling for a radical transformation in all sectors. Museums, like other cultural institutions, can effectively contribute to addressing this challenge not only through responsible management of resources but also by promoting exhibitions and educational programs aimed at raising visitor awareness<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO 2019. See also: Barca, Stamos 2024; Bertacchini *et al.* 2024; Throsby 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Bacchini *et al.* 2024; Borin *et al.* 2025; Marchiori *et al.* 2024; OECD/ICOM 2019; Streimikiene *et al.* 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Cerquetti, Montella 2021.

<sup>7</sup> ICOM 2022a.

<sup>8</sup> ICOM 2022b.

<sup>9</sup> The survey carried out by NEMO in 2022 on 578 museums from 38 European countries highlighted significant weaknesses in the sector. Even though almost 80% of museums state that SDGs are reflected in their strategic plans, only 8.9% have analyzed possible challenges resulting from climate change. The leading impediments to sustainable transitions for museums are lack of funds (59.7%), lack of support from public administration or policy direction (38.8%), and

In recent years, the Covid-19 pandemic, energy crisis, and inflation have heightened awareness of the need for ecological transition, among other challenges, exacerbating problems and uncertainties that had already emerged in previous years<sup>10</sup>. Among other difficulties, climate change poses a threat to cultural heritage preservation, as evidenced by the natural disasters caused by extreme weather events. When interviewed on these issues recently, Krzysztof Pomian<sup>11</sup> argued that global warming and the need to conserve energy would, in the long run, pose a threat to museums. According to the philosopher, ecological ideology presents a perspective that is difficult to reconcile with museums. As structurally loss-making institutions, they will no longer be national priorities.

Furthermore, cultural organizations and events, including theaters, concert halls, opera houses, festivals, and other cultural events, are increasingly engaging with the environmental crisis and broader social concerns. Raising public awareness, confronting urgent issues, and sensitizing audiences to contemporary challenges are integral to the mission of most public cultural organizations<sup>12</sup>. However, the cultural sector's limited agency within sustainability discourses poses significant challenges in formulating action plans, defining objectives, and establishing meaningful indicators<sup>13</sup>.

In this context, it becomes increasingly important to investigate the relationship between cultural organizations and sustainability, analyzing both the contribution that sustainable economic, social, and environmental practices can make to achieving the mission of cultural institutions, namely, the sustainability of culture, and the contribution of cultural institutions to sustainable development by raising public awareness through specific programs, exhibition activities, etc.<sup>14</sup>. Comprehensive studies addressing various dimensions of sustainability are rare, with the majority focusing on ecological aspects, such as climate change<sup>15</sup>. Many authors have also thematized the economic dimension of sustainability. However, this is often less reflected in the tradeoffs that financial sustainability represents when setting priorities and making strategic decisions. While the literature on the social dimension of sustainability is more extensive, covering themes such as diversity, inclusion, activism, and decolonization<sup>16</sup>, a holistic perspective remains limited.

lack of knowledge (30.5%). Almost 70% believe there is insufficient knowledge about SDGs and climate action (NEMO 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Donato, Visser Travagli 2010; Lindqvist 2012; Janes 2014; Lobo Guerrero Arenas, Zulua-ga Medina 2021; Giusti 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Pomian 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Belfiore 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Ćwikła, Labaronne 2025.

<sup>14</sup> Cerquetti, Montella 2021.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., Cameron, Neilson 2015.

<sup>16</sup> E.g., Catlin-Legutko, Taylor 2021; Cole, Lott 2019; Janes, Sandell 2019; Labaronne, Leuschen 2021.

In this special issue, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of whether and to what extent sustainability is incorporated into strategic planning and social and sustainability reporting activities<sup>17</sup>. The challenges associated with evaluating the work of cultural organizations through the lens of other rationalities, such as social value, have been widely addressed in the arts management literature<sup>18</sup>. The issue regains topicality in light of the urgency for the cultural sector to take responsibility for sustainable transition.

Building on these needs, this special issue seeks to address the following questions: How can cultural institutions lead change and accelerate a transition towards sustainability? What resources and skills do they need? What actions should be promoted? What is the state of the art of sustainability studies in the cultural sector and of sustainable practices initiated by cultural institutions?

## *2. Structure and content of the special issue*

The call for papers on “Cultural institutions facing the challenge of sustainability: from theory to practice” was launched at the beginning of 2024 and spread during the workshop “Scienza, conoscenza, sostenibilità” (Science, knowledge, sustainability), which took place at the University of Salerno on 9 February 2024. The workshop was co-organized by the IASS – Italian Association for Sustainability Science. The initiative aimed to promote a multi-perspective and shared reflection on the contribution of science to the co-creation of knowledge for sustainability, addressing primarily the academic community, particularly scholars and students investigating sustainability from various disciplinary areas.

By April 2024, we received 41 proposals, from which we selected 16 abstracts. By October 2024, ten of them were finalized, and eight – six in English and two in Italian – were successfully accepted for publication following a thorough peer-review process. These final papers examine sustainability in the cultural sector from various disciplinary perspectives, including management, museum studies, and geography, employing diverse methodological approaches such as literature reviews, theoretical overviews, conceptual and empirical analyses, as well as case studies.

The special issue is opened by Stefano Rodighiero, Carlo Fusari, Fabrizio Montanari, and Davide Sordi, who provide an interpretive review of 81 aca-

<sup>17</sup> Borin 2023; Cerquetti *et al.* 2023.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Labaronne 2017; Labaronne, Piber 2020.

demical articles and 33 practitioner documents on the contribution of cultural institutions and festivals to sustainable development (*How do cultural institutions and festivals contribute to sustainable development? An interpretive review of academic and practitioner literature*). The research findings identify three main mechanisms – connecting, caring, and empowering – through which cultural institutions and festivals generate value across economic, cultural, social, and environmental dimensions. The authors also find four policy areas – value creation, equity and resilience, education and training, and participatory governance – across which policymakers leverage cultural institutions and festivals to pursue sustainability-oriented policies. By bridging scholarly and practitioner perspectives, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted role of culture in advancing sustainable development.

The following paper by Annamaria Esposito, Angela Besana, and Chiara Fisichella (*Harmonising sustainability in theatres as catalysts for resilience*) investigates the critical role of theaters in fostering resilience and sustainability. Based on a literature review on sustainability and its application to the cultural and creative sectors, their research adopts a qualitative approach to examine the sustainability orientation of five theaters in Milan. The results highlight their potential to act as catalysts for society's reflection, dialogue, and action towards sustainability, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach and the indispensable role of community involvement and stakeholder collaboration. The field research reveals that the sustainability of theaters depends on global strategies, including management efficiency, marketing innovation, and diversification of funding. The digitization of archives and the adoption of sustainable production practices are emerging as pivotal in minimizing environmental impact and preserving cultural heritage. Simultaneously, innovative staging, audience engagement in sustainability, and the development of new works addressing current sustainability challenges serve to amplify the societal impact of theaters.

Three papers follow, which explore the sustainability measurement issues from different perspectives.

In their study (*Non-financial reporting in cultural organizations: motivations, processes, and outputs*), Diana Martello, Paola Dubini, and Alberto Monti investigate the motivations, processes, and outputs of non-financial reporting in Italian cultural organizations through qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews and focus groups. In response to European and global regulatory requirements, as well as increasing transparency expectations driven by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, cultural organizations face growing pressure to disclose non-financial results that demonstrate their value creation. However, the lack of a consistent regulatory framework leads to inconsistencies in reporting practices, including format, tone, and indicators, which often fail to meet stakeholder expectations.

Next, the paper by Nicola Urbino (*Musei a prova di CSR: analisi dei modelli di approccio al bilancio sociale, ricadute operative e impatto per gli istituti culturali nazionali*) frames the topic within the debate on corporate social responsibility (CSR), examining reporting models, operational effects, and implications for Italian museums. The definition of CSR policies is a central issue in contemporary museology, as the role of museums in developing social, cultural, and environmental impact strategies has become increasingly prominent. The publication of the social report can provide an overarching perspective in this domain as a primary tool for impact assessment in the CSR field. The research focuses on the operational significance of structured social reporting for Italian museums. Through evaluation grids partially provided by the legislator, it analyzes the quality of the published social reports, examining their strengths and weaknesses, to offer a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon in the national context.

Linked to sustainability measurement issues is also the paper by Simone Betti, Diego Borghi, and Lorenzo Virgini (*“Miniere di turisti”: l’analisi della sostenibilità e delle prospettive di sviluppo turistico, dal nazionale al locale, per la riqualificazione delle aree minerarie*). The research examines the tourism-led regeneration of disused mining sites in Italy through an integrated geographical approach that combines field observations, spatial analysis using GIS, and automated data extraction via web scraping. The assessment framework proposed by the authors employs multidimensional KPIs to evaluate sustainability, accessibility, attractiveness, and community engagement, incorporating scalar dynamics and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The analysis focuses on selected sites within the ReMi network in Marche, Tuscany, and Sardinia, examining the interplay between industrial heritage valorization, governance practices, risks of gentrification, and the active participation of local populations in shaping new territorial meanings. The results reveal regional disparities and diverse models of local development. The study contributes to the geographical debate on post-industrial landscapes, offering transferable indicators to guide planning and long-term monitoring of sustainable tourism in mining geosites.

The last three papers expand the analysis of sustainability, presenting three case studies involving a corporate museum, a leadership development program, and a territory-based community museum with a stronger focus on the social dimension of sustainability.

*What does sustainability mean in a corporate museum? Learning from CUBO, “Museo di Impresa del Gruppo Unipol”*, by Eleonora Carloni, aims to fill a knowledge gap in the scientific literature on corporate museums, primarily focused on their strategic role, by analyzing how sustainability is framed and measured within these organizations. The paper investigates their potential to leverage corporate sustainability and support society’s sustainable development by examining a collaborative action research project carried out

with CUBO, “Museo d’impresa del Gruppo Unipol”, which led to the development of a performance measurement system (PMS) to assess the museum’s sustainability performance. This PMS, which carries an exquisite social connotation, could serve as an inspiration for practitioners in the sector for future implementations.

Carola Boehm’s paper (*Embedding Culture 3.0 and University 3.0 in leadership development programmes for heritage organisations and heritage sites*) critically examines the evolving notion of cultural leadership by proposing a model for executive training in the heritage sector. The aim is to equip future leaders to address pressing challenges such as placemaking, budget constraints, and ecological sustainability. The study applies a cultural political economy (CPE) approach to navigate the complexities surrounding cultural leadership, while also employing two key “lenses” for shaping content and learning environments in 21st-century knowledge societies – cultural engagement (Sacco’s Culture 3.0) and institutional learning (Boehm’s University 3.0). The article presents findings from the evaluation of the first three years of executive leadership courses and outlines the design of the next phase, which places greater emphasis on heritage, digital transformation, and sustainability.

Finally, *Learning from a garden. Reframing sustainability in a participatory community museum* by Anna Chiara Cimoli and Željka Miklošević reconsiders the main theoretical and methodological principles of urban heritage and museology from a post-humanist perspective, aiming to view sustainability in community and territory-based museums from a new angle. This process is illustrated through the case study of MUBIG, a territory-based community museum located in a Milan suburb. The paper aims to explore the possibilities of engaging with posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism and their implications for heritage management, while simultaneously adhering to the principles and critical aspects of the humanist approach to heritage. Taking the garden as a metaphor, as well as a concrete open-air museum, and a “thinking through nature” tool, the interpretation of data gathered through various sources over a year-long period provides space for the unlearning or relearning of conventional postulates of museum management in a sustainable key. This process has been shaped into six “lessons” whose key concepts are organicity, relationality, coexistence, grafting, seasonality, and slowness.

As a *Classic*, we republish an excerpt from *Silent Spring*, by Rachel Carson (1962), a cornerstone text in environmental and social sciences that transformed society’s perspective on the environment, public health, and the relationship between humans and nature, laying the foundation for the modern environmental movement.

The book, explicitly mentioned in two papers published in this special issue, remains a pillar for scientific research ethics and *raison d’être*, as it spurs scholars to conduct research that matters, aimed at changing public consciousness and influencing policy. To achieve this objective, Rachel Carson reminds

us of the need for collaboration among different research fields, sharing and spreading our knowledge among a wider audience:

There is still very limited awareness of the nature of the threat. This is an era of specialists, each of whom sees his own problem and is unaware of or intolerant of the larger frame into which it fits. It is also an era dominated by industry, in which the right to make a dollar at whatever cost is seldom challenged. When the public protests, confronted with some obvious evidence of damaging results of pesticide applications, it is fed little tranquilizing pills of half truth. We urgently need an end to these false assurances, to the sugar coating of unpalatable facts. It is the public that is being asked to assume the risks that the insect controllers calculate. The public must decide whether it wishes to continue on the present road, and it can do so only when in full possession of the facts. In the words of Jean Rostand, "The obligation to endure gives us the right to know."

Working to promote the right to know, Rachel Carson's book also stands out for its compelling and accessible prose, which effectively merges science and activism, shifting environmental concern from a niche of scholars to the broader public.

Finally, we firmly believe that the interconnectedness of all life forms, as emphasized in *Silent Spring*, can be extended to the interconnectedness of all scientific sectors, thereby highlighting the contribution of culture and cultural institutions to the transition towards a more sustainable future.

To conclude this special issue, we present the reviews of two timely books by researchers and practitioners deeply engaged in the field of sustainability.

Christopher Garthe's *The Sustainable Museum: How Museums Contribute to the Great Transformation* offers an appropriate and compelling contribution to the ongoing discourse on how museums can respond to the challenges of the Anthropocene. Garthe argues that sustainability in museums transcends technical upgrades or carbon accounting; it is a multidimensional, systemic endeavor that requires re-imagining institutional roles and inspiring broader societal change.

Complementing this perspective, Iphigenia Taxopoulou's *Sustainable Theatre: Theory, Context, Practice* provides the first comprehensive exploration of how the theater and performing arts sector is addressing the climate and environmental crisis. Through a multifaceted and international lens, Taxopoulou foregrounds the pioneering work of institutions and individuals who are reshaping the theater landscape with sustainability at its core.

### 3. *Research trends and further developments*

The contributions in this special issue, alongside the remarkable resonance of the call for papers as evidenced by the high number of abstract submissions received, reveal that researchers, policymakers, and practitioners are actively

engaging with sustainability. However, the landscape remains marked by fragmented rather than consolidated discussions, and empirical research continues to be dominated by case studies rather than sector-wide scholarship. This underscores the pressing need for more evidence-based approaches and strategic efforts to defragment and consolidate the sustainability transition, fostering stronger linkages between arts management scholars, cultural policy, and practitioners across the field. Furthermore, the research is heavily centered on authors and organizations in Europe, which runs counter to the requirement for sustainability transitions to function on a global scale.

Upon reviewing the papers included in this issue, we can also confirm the lively discussion surrounding the topics of sustainability-oriented performance management and indicators, as well as sustainability reporting (Betti *et al.*, Carloni, Urbino and Martello *et al.*). This topic has been an increasing concern for the cultural sector over the last decade, following a trend in other sectors, as well as the growing legislative and societal pressure<sup>19</sup>. In the investigations presented in this special issue, the complexity of this theme emerges, as revealed through thorough examinations of cases, experiences with measurement and reporting, and proposals for more comprehensive measurement models. While the analyses reveal common elements in different reporting choices and similar suggestions for integrations and advancements in indicators, the issue of the relationship between indicators for sustainability reporting in the cultural sector and widely accepted sustainability reporting frameworks in other sectors (e.g., GRI or ESRS) remains unresolved. This gap calls for further research and academic reflection that can support policymaking and professional practices during a moment of significant transition to new reporting frameworks<sup>20</sup>, as well as a rethinking of the role of culture in sustainable development<sup>21</sup>.

Among the wide range of topics and subtopics emerging in this special issue, a new notion of cultural heritage also arises – one that is open, dynamic, and even non-institutionalized. Case studies discussed by the authors do not focus on “traditional” archeological sites or art museums, but rather on industrial heritage such as disused mining sites (Betti *et al.*), corporate museums (Carloni),

<sup>19</sup> Borin *et al.* 2024; Borin *et al.* 2025.

<sup>20</sup> There are several initiatives related to new standards development. For instance, from a legislative perspective, it is significant to mention the CSRD – Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (EU 2022/2464), for which discussions on applications and amendments are still ongoing (see, in particular, the Stop-the-Clock Directive – EU 2025/794 – and the Omnibus Package). The CSRD introduces the ESRS – European Sustainability Reporting Standards. Meanwhile, the GRI – Global Reporting Initiative is developing 40 sector-specific standards. See: European Union 2022, 2025; European Commission 2025.

<sup>21</sup> The MONDIACULT conference 2025, which took place in Barcelona from 29 to 3 October, testified to this intense questioning of the role of culture in the sustainable development scenario.

and territory-based community museums (Cimoli and Miklošević). This hybrid notion of cultural heritage also brings a different approach to its management and governance<sup>22</sup>. A strong focus on citizen participation and community involvement<sup>23</sup> is evident in several papers published in this special issue (Betti *et al.*, Boehm, Cimoli, Esposito *et al.*, and Rodighiero *et al.*, among others) as a way not only to reach social sustainability, but also to better achieve all the dimensions of sustainability. It is also worth noting that citizens and communities take part in the measurement processes starting from the design phase. As already highlighted, this calls for «new management practices and governance models that seek to actively engage all stakeholders, local and other communities in ‘open, participatory, effective and coherent’ processes of governance»<sup>24</sup>.

We hope this special issue contributes to a deeper understanding of how museums, theaters, and other cultural organizations can serve as catalysts for sustainability transitions – while also becoming more responsible, accountable, resilient, and future-oriented institutions. We also hope that the identified patterns and research gaps provide valuable guidance for future investigations, inspiring further inquiry and innovation across the cultural sector. We take this opportunity to express our sincere gratitude to the many reviewers whose thoughtful and rigorous feedback has been instrumental in shaping the quality of this special issue. Their expertise and generosity have helped ensure that each contribution meets the highest scholarly standards and advances the conversation on sustainability in the cultural sector.

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