

Article

Promoting Underground Cultural Heritage through Sustainable Practices: A Design Thinking and Audience Development Approach

Olga Lo Presti *  and Maria Rosaria Carli

National Research Council—Institute for Studies on the Mediterranean (ISMed), 80134 Naples, Italy; mariarosaria.carli@ismed.cnr.it

* Correspondence: olga.lopresti@ismed.cnr.it

Abstract: This paper examines two sustainability practices in complex and uncertain processes such as the case of the promotion of the underground built heritage (UBH). Convinced that the sustainability of a UBH valorisation project is only guaranteed by its survival over time, the authors argue that the decision-making process must be bottom-up, i.e., promoted and developed by the actors of the territory—communities and stakeholders—who share a strategic objective. They assume that they have already defined the value of the asset to be enhanced through heritage interpretation. At this point, two practices are proposed. The first is aimed at enhancing the UBH for the territory itself and involves the application of design thinking; the second, in the interest of the economic agents, is aimed at promoting the territory externally—promoting sustainable tourism—through the application of audience development. The work is a theoretical proposal and has not yet been tested in the field. The authors reserve the right to test it in a subsequent case study.

Keywords: underground built heritage; COST action; heritage interpretation; design thinking; audience development



Citation: Lo Presti, O.; Carli, M.R. Promoting Underground Cultural Heritage through Sustainable Practices: A Design Thinking and Audience Development Approach. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 9125. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15119125>

Academic Editors:
Ernesto Marcheggiani and
Giuseppe Pace

Received: 19 April 2023
Revised: 15 May 2023
Accepted: 31 May 2023
Published: 5 June 2023



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1. Introduction

The choice to preserve memory and to meet the needs of the present without compromising those of future generations requires an intense and focused cultural commitment. However, definitions of sustainable development and its three pillars essentially ignore the cultural dimension. Culture has often been seen as part of social or socio-cultural sustainability [1], and the emphasis has been on preserving socio-cultural patterns [2].

Indeed, some of the key factors that may contribute to cultural sustainability include:

1. Intergenerational transmission: The successful transfer of cultural knowledge, skills, and practices across generations is crucial to cultural sustainability. This requires a range of mechanisms, including education, mentoring, apprenticeships, and storytelling.
2. Recognition and respect for cultural heritage: can contribute to its preservation and transmission over time. This can involve policies and programs that support the protection and promotion of cultural heritage, as well as efforts to raise public awareness and appreciation for cultural practices.

In order to identify best practices in the field of sustainability and longevity of cultural heritage, some key criteria have been identified in the literature that insist on the social, cultural, economic and environmental dimensions of heritage. To validate possible interventions to enhance the value of a heritage asset, it is necessary to ask if it contributes to the development of the local community, if it improves the bond of the local population with their heritage, and if it contributes to the promotion of sustainable tourism.

This means examining the best practices and means of promoting the achievement of these objectives.

One of the innovative tools identified for this purpose is heritage interpretation, which originated in the United States and was then used in English-speaking countries (United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia) from the 1950s onwards, and has only recently spread to Europe. Its value lies in strengthening a community's sense of identity through knowledge of its cultural, social and environmental heritage and raising awareness of its conservation and management.

In different countries, heritage interpretation associations emphasise different aspects. In Canada, for example, the focus is on the direct involvement of visitors, local community groups and other stakeholders, regardless of age or educational background. The cultural good or artefact is the protagonist of a communication process that can create emotional and intellectual connections between the public's interests and the meanings inherent in the resource [3]. In the UK, by contrast, interpretation aims to enhance experiences, and deepen understanding of people, places, events, and objects of the past, and present [4]. Interpretation Australia "believes that interpretation enriches our lives through engaging emotions, enhancing experiences and deepening the understanding of places, people, events and objects from the past and present" [5].

2. Theoretical Background

Heritage Interpretation aims to provide emotions and experiences as well as engage visitors in the heritage discourse and Interpretation of the meaning of cultural heritage sites is a central component of public participation in historical reflection and collective memory. The reach of heritage interpretation helps people view historical, cultural, and environmental legacies as evolving. It analyses past actions and considers the essential questions these places pose to society today.

The reference text for heritage interpretation [6] (p. 25) "which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information". Tilden defines six principles and in general, emphasizes the importance of making communication relevant to the audience, telling holistic stories, practising the art of revelation based on information rather than simply disseminating facts, provoking the audience to want to do something, whether it is to reflect more deeply, learn more, or act upon new information, and tailoring interpretation to different audiences. In particular, Tilden's second principle states: "Information, as such, is not Interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon the information. However, they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information" [6] (p. 31). Tilden's six principles are still in use today: "Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection" [6] (p. 35).

Sharing these principles, in 2008 the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) adopted a Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites. In the preamble, it states that: *"From the vast range of surviving material remains and intangible values of past communities and civilizations, the choice of what to preserve, how to preserve it, and how it is to be presented to the public are all elements of site interpretation. They represent every generation's vision of what is significant, what is important, and why material remains from the past should be passed on to generations yet to come"* [7] (p. 1). In its seven principles, the ICOMOS Charter highlights: *"Interpretation and presentation should encourage individuals and communities to reflect on their own perceptions of a site and assist them in establishing a meaningful connection to it. (Principle 1 also defines that "in cases where physical access to a cultural heritage site is restricted for reasons of conservation, cultural sensitivity, adaptive reuse or safety, interpretation and presentation should be provided off-site")* [7] (p. 4), [8]. Specifically, *"Interpretation and presentation should be based on evidence gathered through accepted scientific and scholarly methods as well as from living cultural traditions"* (Principle 2) [7] (p. 4). The Charter echoed and reaffirmed the principles of the Faro Convention [9] which, in recognizing knowledge and cultural heritage as human rights [10], had already introduced the concept of "cultural heritage", understood as *"a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection*

and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions. It includes all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time" [10] (Article 2, paragraph a). The Faro Convention establishes the concept of "heritage community" as "people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations" [10] (Article 2, paragraph b). Place and sense of place are also important in the relationship between heritage and community. Individuals who have a special connection to a place through significant events or other personal ties are more likely to form communities and engage in the enhancement of the cultural heritage of that place.

The Faro Charter of the Council of Europe emphasises the significance of involving a broad public in the process of interpretation. Meanwhile, the proposed international definitions and principles outlined in the ICOMOS Charter highlight the importance of interpretation and presentation as vital means to enable comprehension and appreciation of the significance and diverse meanings of cultural heritage sites, and to promote public awareness of their need for protection and conservation. Since Tilden's first definition of heritage interpretation in 1977, there have been other ways of using heritage interpretation as a tool for managing areas of sustainable development; as a persuasive communication activity; as an educational activity. Interpretation is also used to manage visitor traffic in heritage areas or to plan sustainable tourism development in heritage areas.

The literature on heritage interpretation is relatively rich [11]. In relation to the role of interpretation in the relationship between tourism, local communities and heritage, the contribution of McGrath [12] is very interesting. The author argues that the participation of local communities in defining the content of interpretation messages strongly reinforces a sense of belonging and identity. The aim is therefore to turn heritage sites into places of learning and reflection on the past, as well as valuable resources for sustainable community development and intercultural and intergenerational dialogue. Heritage communities are inclusive and include heritage professionals, volunteers, special interest groups and independent citizen-led initiatives, as well as culturally diverse minorities. These communities are becoming increasingly active in defining and claiming what they consider important, thus influencing heritage management.

Specifically, in the cultural field, digital technologies offer new ways of knowing, learning, sharing and storing information. They have an impact not only at the time of the visit but also before and after. The participation of communities in the interpretation, communication and preservation of cultural heritage has therefore become an increasingly important and debated issue in recent years. Digital technology has played a crucial role in this process. Tubb [13] argues that "interactive material played a vital part in the effectiveness of interpretive messages" (p. 476).

With regard to technologies, it is then necessary to develop a reflection in terms of use, so that the valorization of the asset can represent the best result of community involvement. Silberman [14] reiterates the importance of involving local communities in decisions about heritage interpretation. Stating that it is necessary to go beyond "what to interpret" and add "for whom and how" in order to enhance the relationships and interactions between guests and hosts. In this process, the joint involvement of communities and stakeholders in the interpretation of a heritage asset, through a co-planning approach that allows for the identification of the asset, its valorization and promotion, is therefore crucial.

3. Methodology

The relationship between institutions, communities and stakeholders and the use of technological tools to enhance cultural heritage are issues that are and will continue to be at the centre of scholarly debate [15]. There is no doubt that technology has an important and indispensable role to play, but all too often it is effective in a promotional process to attract visitors and investment, but not sufficient to ensure long-term sustainability. This aspect is even more important for underground development. In fact, the majority of Underground Built Heritage (UBH) [16] is not accessible and therefore not usable, and the application of

virtual technologies is often used for this purpose [17]. Although these applications make it possible to use them online, they are not very sustainable over time, because if there is no interest from stakeholders, everything “dies”. A different fate befalls an asset that is identified and valued by the local community in common with stakeholder interests. This shared goal responds to the need for a sense of place and to the aforementioned call to go beyond “what to interpret” by adding “for whom and how”. Only after these steps are taken will the appropriate technology be identified, and the shared interests allow the process to remain “on” over time.

This approach finds its application in The COST Action CA18110 “Underground Built Heritage as a catalyser for Community Valorisation” (Underground4value). The project is based on the idea that local communities should be empowered and organised in partnership through place-based theoretical approaches to condition strategic thinking and experience sustainability transitions in complex and uncertain processes [18]. The Living Lab is the most appropriate connotation of these actions. During the project years, two handbooks were published: *Underground Built Heritage Valorisation: A Handbook and Practices for the Underground Built Heritage Valorisation*. These handbooks provided space for comparing methodologies, case studies and research groups with the ultimate aim of promoting UBH as a valuable resource to be celebrated and preserved. They realized their full potential to support the development of local communities. Case study living labs are the perfect application for our study.

The main objective of the COST Action CA18110 is to use UBH to guide local communities towards sustainable transitions and, through the creation of Living Labs for the valorisation of underground heritage, to encourage active participation, revitalise the public sphere and stimulate new skills and jobs.

The project uses the methodological proposal of Strategic Transition Practice (STP), which is based on empowering local communities by experimenting with multi-level strategic dialogue, to integrate these tools into a single empirical approach [19]. The Living Lab is designed to support the objectives of the project and respond to different objectives such as experimentation; social innovation; practice orientation; community orientation; co-design thinking and collective learning. The last two are the reference elements for our analysis.

Co-design is a method that involves the active participation of all stakeholders at every stage of the development process of the asset valorisation idea—from planning to implementation and evaluation—and is based on an equal footing in which all stakeholders have equal weight and decision-making power. This method favours the best choice between the different options for solving the problem, as the diversity in the composition of the team makes it possible to take into account all the different perspectives and to arrive at shared and therefore sustainable solutions over time.

The final phase of the Underground Built Heritage as a Catalyst for Community Valorisation project was the development of the Underground4value (U4V) Toolbox. “This toolbox is a collection of recommended methodologies and workflows, case studies, reference documents, external websites and other supporting materials, guidance and best practice documents that give users an idea of what can be achieved on their own and help to tackle problems at a fraction of the cost. The U4V Toolbox has eight flexible building blocks to help communities develop their specific social practices and find their way to enhance their underground built heritage, is supported by the STP methodology and aims to facilitate an ongoing dialogue between professionals and citizens” [20].

4. Design Thinking and Audience Development: The Two Proposed Methodologies for the U4V Toolkit

The main objective of the COST project is to develop a comprehensive toolbox to assist different local actors such as stakeholders, local communities and institutions in identifying, managing and enhancing the Underground Built Heritage (UBH). This toolbox includes a set of recommended methodologies, workflows, case studies, reference documents, external websites and other supporting materials, including guidance and best practice documents.

It aims to provide users with insights into what can be achieved in their own context and to help them tackle problems at a reduced cost.

The U4V Toolbox consists of eight adaptable building blocks that enable communities to develop their specific social practices and navigate the process of valorising their underground built heritage. A shared understanding of the heritage is established by first formulating a sustainable vision for heritage management. The project then proceeds to define a potential partnership that is aligned with specific objectives, using a goal-oriented approach known as Transition Management (TM), which emphasises participation. In addition, the methodology incorporates the Strategic Stakeholder Dialogue (SSD) approach as a process-oriented strategy formulation method. These two methodologies are integrated into a unified empirical approach called Strategic Transition Practice (STP), which emphasises experimentation and empowerment of local communities and involves multi-level strategic dialogue, such as Living Labs.

The overall aim of the methodology based on Strategic Transition Practice (STP) is to facilitate an ongoing dialogue between professionals and citizens. The project also involves organising partnerships with clearly defined goals, objectives and governance procedures that link the UBH to local identity and the wider global community. All these phases serve as a prelude to the operational phase. Blocks 5, 6 and 7 deal specifically with the operational phase, during which structured options for choice are presented, meaning is constructed and experimentation takes place. Block 5 focuses on providing technical support and fostering local creativity, while Block 6 supports the sustainability of partnerships. Finally, block 7 aims to ensure that partnerships are realistic, efficient and transparent. The reflections of the present work start from the operational phase and the assumption that the community and the stakeholders have already shared a common interpretation of the heritage—according to the criteria better described in the first paragraph—which gives an asset its specific value [21]. In the flowchart of the operational phase (Figure 1), the authors' discussion now turns to the proposal of two methodologies.

This proposal is based on a double objective: to respect the sense of place (aiming at the positive reflections of the valorization of the asset for the territory itself) and to look beyond the boundaries of the geographical space, opening up to the dissemination of the value of the asset for tourists.

The first of the proposed methodologies that aims to enhance the asset for the benefit of the territory is Design Thinking, which is a methodology for creative problem solving and has the advantage that it can be applied to any environment, challenge or problem. Design Thinking was outlined by Stanford University and stems from studies on the innovation of creative, visual and ambidextrous thinking. It enables communities and stakeholders to develop a dynamic innovation process in which entirely new processes, services and products are designed in a sustainable and continuous way [22,23]. The methodology consists of five phases: empathise, define, design, prototype and test.

The process begins with the confrontation between the local community and the stakeholders for the valorisation of the chosen asset, and the aspect of empathy assumes a central and important role, as the design approach takes place between people with different roles, cultural backgrounds, social positions and geographical origins [24]. The second phase aims to analyse all the information gathered on the asset in the first phase, in order to synthesise it and define the type of valorisation to be carried out.

Decisions will have to be based first on the economic, social and cultural benefits to the target community and stakeholders, and then on the underground asset. The design thinking process is not linear. The five phases are not always sequential and can sometimes occur in parallel or be repeated iteratively. Each stage must be understood as a component or node that contributes to the success of the process. At all stages of the process of applying design thinking, expert designers should be involved to act as facilitators of the process.

In the third stage, the designer has understood the needs of the community and stakeholders, analysed the proposals, and is ready to design an improvement model based on this information. The penultimate stage is prototyping, which involves creating a simplified, low-

cost version of the model to test and, if necessary, making changes in real-time to replicate it. This phase will help the designers to have a clearer idea of how the area would react to the proposed solution. This phase will also allow them to assess the need to adopt technologies and, if necessary, identify the most appropriate ones, not only to enhance the asset for the territory, but also to maintain the links and connections with those who have left the country and who can still experience it virtually. The last phase is the testing phase, which will fully identify the model. This sequence shows a possible cyclicity in which each phase can represent a new starting point in the development of the final solution. This methodology, shared and supported, defines the link between the asset and the actors in the area and enhances its potential as a historical legacy for future generations.

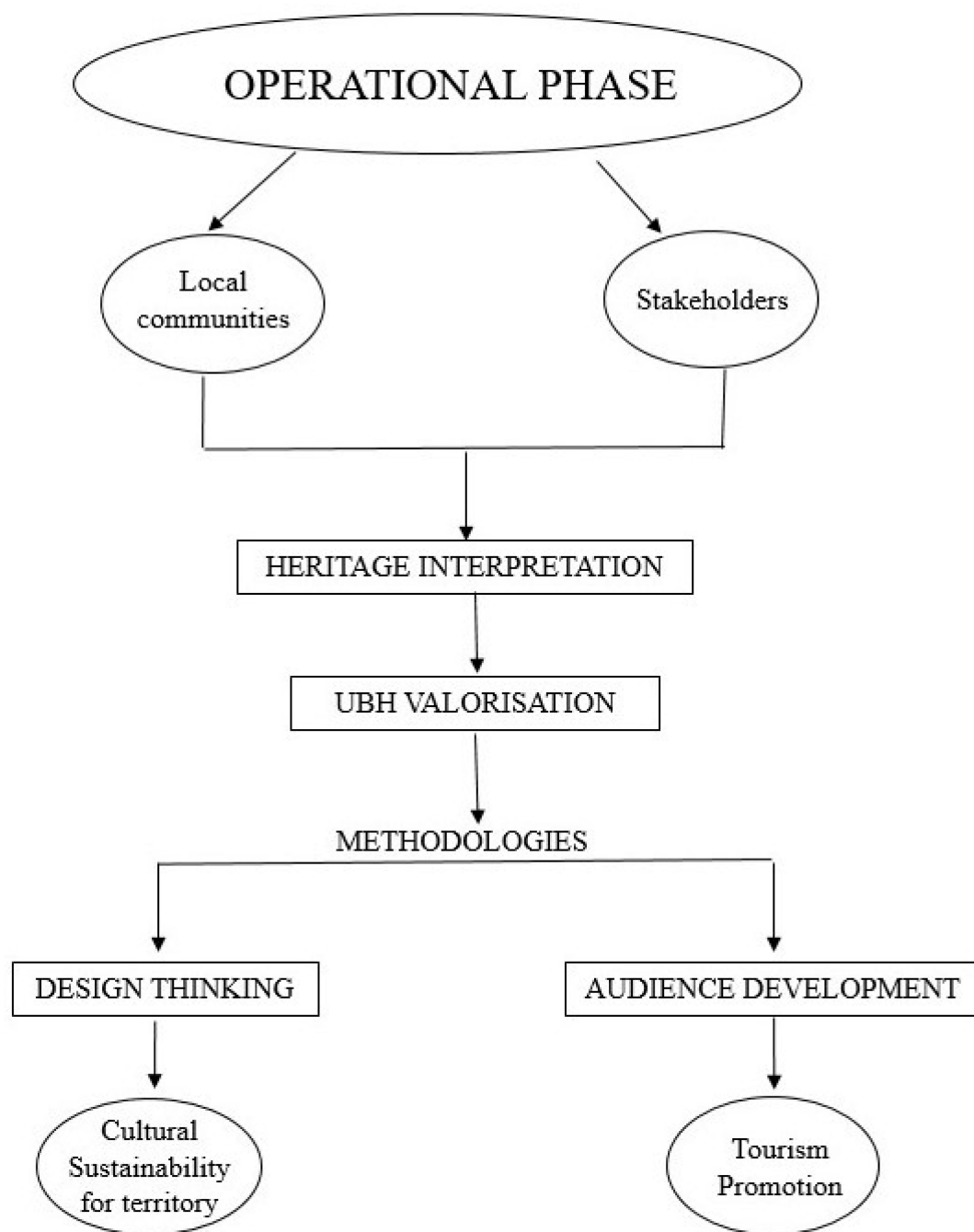


Figure 1. Flowchart of the operational phase. Our elaboration.

Stakeholders/investors and economic agents in the area may wish to make further efforts to promote the asset beyond the borders of the area. A second methodology is proposed for this purpose: Audience Development, a marketing methodology also applicable to museums [25].

According to Falk J.H. [26], it is essential to understand the identity and motivations of visitors. Identities can be multiple, expressed individually and/or collectively, and influenced by external and internal factors—personal and social. Audience development [27,28] is effective precisely because it allows the creation of personas, i.e., descriptions of types of people who represent potential groups of visitors to the property and serve as templates for the construction of visitation scenarios. The definition of personas also helps to understand what the motivations and expectations of the site visitors might be and provides reference points for the design of loyalty processes. Once the target audience has been defined, a content strategy is developed to meet the interests and needs of the potential visitor. Obviously, digital technologies offer many opportunities for the visibility of places, related events and cultural initiatives that are already online and that arouse interest.

These new methods of exploring, visualising and manipulating intangible information represent a new stage of scholarly inquiry known as virtual heritage. Virtual heritage involves the use of digital technologies and virtual environments for the purpose of re-searching, preserving, and transmitting our cultural heritage.

The implementation of these technologies would enable the controlled and sustained exploration of inaccessible UBH. Conversely, the availability of a virtual representation may also lead to an increase in visitation, potentially undermining conservation efforts. This challenge could be mitigated by the introduction of a quota system. One potential solution to address accessibility and preservation issues is the use of virtual reality technology, such as mixed reality, within these heritage sites. Mixed reality, a variant of virtual reality, combines computer-generated 3D elements with real-world imagery to create an immersive experience that simulates the user's physical presence in the environment.

UBH Awareness serves as a valuable resource for individuals to become advocates for their region, enabling the transfer of knowledge, awareness and, most importantly, preserved cultural assets from one generation to the next. By supporting a community-based approach to disaster risk reduction in heritage sites and emphasising a systems-oriented perspective on heritage, this approach promotes resilience and strengthens the linkages between heritage, social dynamics and environmental aspects of sustainable development. We then optimise the content for the target audience on search engines using relevant keywords, meta descriptions, and tags. The use of social media is another strategic tool to target the identified potential audience, as promotion through images, videos, descriptions, and ad hoc hashtags is very effective [29]. A further step, once the audience has been captured, is to build a list to which updates, news and promotions can be sent to enhance the relationship between asset managers and visitors. Of course, key metrics such as website traffic, social media engagement and email open rates are monitored. These evaluations help to determine appropriate interventions to optimize audience engagement time.

Needless to say that audience development is an ongoing process that requires constant effort and optimization: time and investment.

5. Conclusions

Cultural heritage is increasingly subject to interventions aimed at exploitation and profit maximisation. Even educational proposals are increasingly giving way to proposals for engagement, facilitated by the use of new technologies. This is why it is so important to encourage bottom-up co-design initiatives that bring together local stakeholders whose priority is the conservation and enhancement of their local heritage. The use of heritage interpretation guarantees the sharing of values and objectives between the community and stakeholders, which can ensure the durability of the UBH, its valorisation and its sustainability, including cultural sustainability. It is precisely the recognition of the central

role of people that led the authors to propose the methodologies of design thinking and audience development as a way of working with and for the territory. This vision is fully in line with the main idea of the COST Action “Underground Built Heritage as a Catalyst for Community Valorisation” or Living Labs, which is based on a bottom-up approach, focusing on the processes of knowledge exchange and facilitating communication between all the actors involved. On the one hand, the development of a valorisation strategy based on the five phases of Design Thinking (empathise, define, conceive, prototype and test) allows for the planning of all the ways and means to develop this UBH in the territory in terms of cultural identity and sustainability over time; on the other hand, scenario building with audience development—which specifically identifies the characteristics of potential visitors and builds their loyalty—is cost-effective and shapes the visitor experience by responding more and more precisely also to the needs of the underground for conservation and sustainability over time.

Author Contributions: Abstract M.R.C. and O.L.P.; M.R.C. 1–2, O.L.P. 3–4; Conclusion M.R.C. and O.L.P. Both authors contributed to writing the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This article has been supported by the funds of the COST Action CA18110 “Underground Built Heritage as Catalyst for Community Valorisation” DUS.AD017.178.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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