

Culture–tourism Entanglements: Moving from Grassroots Practices to Regenerative Cultural Policies in Smaller Communities

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Abstract

Inspired by a rapidly emerging shift towards ‘regenerative tourism’ that privileges local improvement and well-being, this article considers the close connections between cultural initiatives and tourism in smaller communities and the often-missing policy frameworks to acknowledge and support these for community benefit. In practice, socio-cultural entrepreneurs develop enmeshed culture–tourism activities frequently propelled by ideas and desires concerning local revitalization. Local projects tend to entangle local heritage, activation of public space, inclusive public participation, and development of new activities by cultural actors. However, such initiatives are often developed in the absence of longer-term cultural and tourism strategies, policies, and plans. Analyzing culture–tourism initiatives in three smaller communities in Portugal linked to creative tourism, this article assesses how key principles and strategies of regenerative tourism can contribute to the development of regenerative culture–tourism policies at the local level, recognizing that culture-shaping policies should be multidimensional and cross-sectoral in nature.

Keywords: regenerative cultural policies; local cultural policy; small communities; culture–tourism initiatives; place-based development; cultural entrepreneurs

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Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns, and restrictions on activities worldwide, *regenerative* has become a wide-spread term in a wide range of contexts. As discourses involving regenerative development unfold in different contents, it is seen as an emerging academic field, one that offers a new paradigm that goes beyond sustainability, but ‘clarity and consensus regarding its meaning and application remain elusive’ (Bellato and Pollock 2023, 2). Efforts to clarify the field theoretically and in practice are still in process. This proliferation is coupled with an underlying concern that the ubiquitousness of the term could lead to a weakening of meaning and even contribute to simplistic appropriations or greenwashing.

Inspired by a rapidly emerging shift towards *regenerative tourism* approaches that intentionally reconceive tourism activity to privilege local improvement and well-being, we notice that such a process of rethinking and reformulation has had only limited attention in cultural policy research. We observe, however, increasing attention to the situated realities of the local in cultural policy research (Gilmour et al. 2019; Durrer et al. 2023), which has been growing ever more important as cities aim to recover from the pandemic. This work views policy-making as ‘a horizontal, dynamic and relational process involving multiple agents, with different perspectives, areas of skill, knowledge and interests’ (Gilmour et al. 2019, 267). Making these situated processes more explicit enables a more nuanced understanding of the political and social contexts for cultural policy formulation and implementation to be developed. However, this focus on local cultural policy tends to be contextualized within other cultural governance levels, rather than re-envisioned from a cross-sectoral linking perspective. Moreover, as Zemite and Kunda (2023) point out, there has been limited research about the way local place-based transformations unfold, as well as how the ‘place’ (with its specific resources) influences development trajectories (Moriggi 2021).

Furthermore, as Baltà Portolés (2023) argues, to better situate cultural policy within the context of addressing sustainability issues and catalysing adaptation and regeneration processes, the process of revision must entail expanding the scope of cultural policy and adopting a more ecosystemic approach to culture that incorporates its interdependencies with other spheres of life. Other recent examinations of local relationships between culture and sustainability have revealed the need for cross-sectoral governance and place-based policies that can integrate community resilience and traditional ecological knowledge (Kangas et al. 2024). However, applications of cultural policy and allied approaches in these contexts need further analysis and development in practice.

These evolving discourses align with growing calls in both tourism and cultural spheres to embed policies within more holistic and long-term approaches to development that explicitly

aim to provide value and well-being to the local community, nurture and support cultural vitality, and encourage care and stewardship of place (Duxbury 2020; Scherf 2023; Qu and Zollet 2024). These approaches enable ‘urban spaces of possibilities’ to advance transformative experiments and collective actions that can co-create future trajectories (Kagan 2023). While some efforts to imagine more holistic local cultural policy approaches are emerging (e.g., Luonila and Ruokolainen 2024), they are often running into siloed bureaucratic structures that challenge the integration of horizontal, cross-sectoral approaches in local government (Karttunen and Koskela 2024). Moreover, given the predominantly urban focus of cultural policy research (Duxbury 2020), most of these writings concern mid-sized and larger cities.

In practice, we observe socio-cultural entrepreneurs in smaller communities developing activities that enmesh culture and tourism, propelled by local revitalization ambitions. These projects tend to feature elements of local heritage, the activation of public space, inclusive public participation, and the development of new activities by cultural actors. However, such initiatives are often developed in the absence of longer-term cultural and tourism strategies, policies, and plans that can acknowledge and support them for community benefit. The close connections between local cultural initiatives and tourism in smaller communities suggest that an alliance of policy efforts, within broader and shared medium- and longer-term development goals, would help advance on-the-ground cultural practices in ways that address community challenges and pursue shared aspirations. In the conceptual and pragmatic work advancing through regenerative tourism approaches, we believe evolving lessons are applicable to local cultural policy development.

This article assesses how key principles of regenerative tourism may contribute to the development of regenerative culture–tourism policies at the local level. With many smaller towns and rural areas adopting both culture and tourism as components of their development strategies (Duxbury and Silva 2020), we find limited guidance on interconnecting these two domains in smaller places. With this in mind, this article pursues two research questions: How do grassroots culture–tourism initiatives contribute to local regenerative dynamics in smaller places? How can local policy frameworks support these cross-sectoral initiatives for local development? The research aims to go beyond theoretical approaches to local regeneration to focus on what it looks like in grassroots practice, and how cultural elements are integral to these local initiatives. Ultimately, we aim to contribute to the development of local policy frameworks that are cross-sectoral in nature, and could embrace actions that intentionally combine culture and tourism for local development and revitalization.

In this article, we analyse culture–tourism initiatives developed by cultural actors in three smaller cities in Portugal: Abrantes, Caldas da Rainha, and Covilhã. Following their previous steps into creative tourism development, and their connections with the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of urban revitalization, new culture–tourism projects emerged that resonate with a regenerative tourism approach. In these projects, we observe how new activities can influence and foster local regenerative dynamics at a micro scale. In the absence of cultural and tourism strategies, policies, or plans or the inadequacy or non-execution of existing ones,

these initiatives have an important role in keeping a grassroots dynamic within the cities that, ideally, could become viral and instigate more integrated local development.

The selection of these cities was based on previous work within the project ‘CREATOUR: Developing Creative Tourism Destinations in Small Cities and Rural Areas’ (2016-2020), in which local organizations from the private, public and cultural sectors developed creative tourism pilot projects featuring active participation, creative self-expression, learning, and a link to the local community (Duxbury and Silva 2020). Taking an integrated approach that interconnects tourism, culture and local development, it focused on creative activities that encourage ‘personal self-expression and interaction between visitors and local residents, inspired by local endogenous resources (place and people), and designed and implemented by local residents for community benefit’ (Duxbury et al. 2021, 1).

With complementary research interests, ‘INTERMEDIA: Cultural Intermediaries in Urban Regeneration in Small Cities’ (2021-2024), a PhD research project funded by the Portuguese Science and Technology Foundation (FCT), studies the role of cultural intermediaries in the dynamics of urban regeneration in small cities in Portugal. The concept of cultural intermediaries has been developed through a wide array of literature (Bourdieu 1979; Callon et al. 2002; Muniesa et al. 2007; Ferreira 2009; Matthews and Smith 2012; Jakob and Van Heur 2014; Virani 2019). These agents work between the public, private, and cultural and creative sectors to promote synergies and mediate partnerships, aiming to contribute to the design and implementation of better integrated cultural and local development projects/initiatives and, in a broader perspective, aspiring to contribute to the development of local cultural policies. This article builds upon INTERMEDIA’s examinations of the networks and culture-based initiatives at play in the three cities.

This article contextualizes its research in two areas: ‘local cultural policy in smaller cities’ and ‘regenerative’ thinking and its application in regenerative tourism. Dominant frameworks of principles and strategies emerging from regenerative literature and practice are used to examine three culture–tourism initiatives, focusing on two cross-cutting thematic areas relevant to local cultural policy: ‘stewardship of the resources of place, identity, and unique potential’ and ‘collaboration, participation, and inclusion’. The case studies are presented and the main observations and factors identified in each are analyzed and collectively synthesized. From these practice-based insights and lessons, a set of reflections are developed to inform local policy better aligned to these culture–tourism initiatives.

Local cultural policy in smaller cities

In small cities, a more-than-economic understanding of cultural and creative actors and ecosystems is required to acknowledge the importance of ‘non-capitalist resources, creative community initiatives, volunteers and community networks’ (Clements 2018, 527). As ‘situated practice’ (Durrer et al. 2023), local cultural policy is marked by its proximity to constituents, which allows it to carve out ‘a unique space in which it can provide independent, responsive, specific policies for the arts and culture’ (Johanson, Kershaw, and Glow 2017, 218) and to influence how cultural and creative work impacts residents’ lives (Westbury 2015).

Regional and local levels tend to prioritize social access and societal *bildung* (Audemard et al. 2024). For example, Lysgård (2016, 1) found that cultural policies of small rural communities are ‘embedded in heritage and tradition based on ideas of participation, mobilisation and social coherence’.

The participation of public, private, and civil society agents ‘can be fundamental for the definition and execution of consequential cultural based territorial development strategies’ (Costa 2020, 127), fostering social cohesion. Local authorities can incorporate inter-sectoral considerations by ‘acting as “brokers and enablers”, connecting across silos to encourage interactions in situ’ (Cunningham et al. 2019, 772, citing OECD 2018, 7). Furthermore, the rise of co-creative and participatory policy approaches can enable creative forms of civic activism with creative professionals engaged as facilitators of these ‘creative change processes’ that aim to build more sustainable and livable places in local communities (Asare 2023, 30). In this context, sensitively linking cultural agents with tourism requires centralizing care for cultural sustainability and place (Duxbury 2021), fostering ongoing intersectoral relationships (Gonçalves et al. 2020), and residents ‘owning’ cultural soft and hard infrastructure ‘before it can be successfully embedded within a tourism strategy’ (Cunningham et al. 2021, 773).

Regenerative approaches: Common principles and strategies

Regenerative origins¹

Regenerative thinking is underscored by an ecological worldview that ‘views life forms as comprising living systems ... nested within larger living systems’ (Bellato and Pollock 2023, 2). Living systems thinking is core to this, ‘to build the capacity of humans to align and co-evolve with life’s systems’ (p. 3, citing Mang and Reed 2019). In general, both research and writings for a wider public have been seeking and evolving alternative pathways to deal with growing environmental issues and legacy systems that were deemed inadequate to address them.

The roots of the term *regenerative* can be found in the world of medicine (e.g., Stocum 2006; Atala et al. 2010) and in agriculture (e.g., Brown 2018). Regenerative and living systems thinking has been strongly influenced by permaculture design and regenerative agriculture (e.g., O’Connell 2022), with ideas taken up, adapted, and extended in the spheres of sustainability and sustainable development (e.g., Lyle 1994; Mang and Reed 2012; Hes and Du Plessis 2015; Roos 2021) and urban planning and design of built environments (e.g., Girardet 2014; Hemenway 2015; Mang and Haggard 2016; Schaefer Caniglia et al. 2020). These works tended to focus on ecological systems in urban contexts but also associated social systems within cities, including ‘empowered communities’ and ‘placemaking’ (Hemenway 2015). These themes are still salient today, and align with a continuing conceptual shift, moving from an understanding of sustainability as merely environmental or as separated into distinct pillars to something more holistic and encompassing of the multiple intertwined domains of lived

¹ We are indebted to the work of Bellato and Pollock (2023), who traced the development of the regenerative paradigm and the key thinkers and (English-language) publications that have been cornerstones in this journey. We take slightly different paths in this overview. Our aim here is to outline the main areas in which regenerative thinking can be found, while pointing out that culture was not usually part of these discourses.

reality, especially evident at the local level of policy and planning (Duxbury et al. 2024). In parallel, work on regenerative economies (e.g., Fullerton 2015; Raworth 2017; Lovins 2020; Sheldon 2022) has explored how principles of nature could be applied to create new models of capitalist economy, the creation of alternative developmental economies (Sanford and Haggard 2020), and the enabling contributions of culture within a context of inclusive wealth (Kaszynska, in this volume).

From sustainable to regenerative tourism

While the concept of sustainable tourism is subject to robust and sometimes contentious debate (Bramwell et al. 2017), it continues to be dominant in tourism policy-making and planning, anchored with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and in the UNWTO's international network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories. It has been subject to criticisms of impact as well as, more broadly, its embedded conceptual framework. For instance, Du Plessis (2012) argues that 'dominant sustainability paradigms are reaching the limitations of their usefulness due to their conceptual foundation in an inappropriate mechanistic worldview and their tacit support of a modernization project preventing effective engagement with a complex, dynamic and living world' (p. 7). Altogether, 'the sustainability paradigm is limited by its Western, linear and reductionist lenses' (Bellato et al. 2023b, 2); in its place, new positions leading towards 'regenerative tourism' have emerged, 'premised on recovery, resilience and rebuilding, with many questioning existing paradigms and development trajectories catalysed by the COVID-19 pandemic' (p. 2, citing Gibson 2021; Sheller 2021).

In practice, regenerative tourism differs from sustainable tourism by 'positioning tourism activities as interventions that develop the capacities of places, communities and their guests to operate in harmony with interconnected social-ecological systems' (Bellato et al. 2022, 1026). Stakeholders in such a living system 'take on transformational roles that contribute to the regeneration of themselves, places and communities' (p. 1037). Shared purpose and collaborative participation are integral to these processes.

With a focus on holistic development and a necessary change from current systems of extraction, regenerative tourism envisions living systems that:

facilitate encounters, create connections and develop reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships through travel practices and experiences, uniquely reflecting tourism places. Regeneration occurs mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually, culturally, socially, environmentally, and economically. (Bellato et al. 2022, 1042)

All these aspects are, ideally, reflected in local place-based culture–tourism initiatives when viewed from a systems perspective, incorporating regenerative processes that align with local cultural and natural patterns and development dynamics (Duxbury et al. 2021).

Regenerative tourism frameworks

While current perspectives on regenerative tourism are fragmented, in their state-of-the-art review, Bellato and Pollock (2023) identify interconnected core themes aligning with a

regenerative tourism paradigm, including regenerative design and development, and regenerative tourism economies, among other contributions to this discourse.² Approaches aligning with *regenerative design and development* draw from ‘the unique potential of place and its communities’ to develop human capacities to ‘align with and contribute to the overall health and wellbeing of places and communities’ (Bellato and Pollock 2023, 4-5). Understanding of the potential of places and communities is rooted in deep understandings of their unique histories and characteristics (Sanford 2019). Place-based processes in regenerative tourism ‘reflect, honour and enhance their unique social-ecological systems’ (Bellato et al. 2022, 1037, citing Pollock 2019).

Among the few efforts to develop frameworks of principles for regenerative tourism, two are prominent in the current state of thinking and practice. One framework was developed by Bellato et al. (2023a) based on identifying several common attributes across key published works (in both scientific and grey literature). It sets out seven principles as a conceptual framework for regenerative tourism. The other framework, a more practice-based approach, was developed by The Tourism CoLab³ (2024), founded by Dianne Dredge, based on transformative practice and deep systems change. This work sets out 10 pillars of everyday practice of regenerative tourism. The two frameworks include an overall vision and mindset, more concrete actions, and broader goals. Bellato et al. (2023a)’s framework highlights discovering the unique potential of a place; promoting cultural revival and local endogenous knowledges and practices; and collaborating to evolve and enact regenerative approaches, catalyse transformations, and create regenerative places and communities. The Tourism CoLab (2024)’s pillars put an emphasis on place, identity, and stewardship; participation and inclusion; and fostering a sense of community. For the present study, both of these frameworks are insightful, incorporating knowledge linked to both research and practice.

Across these two frameworks for regenerative tourism, two recurring dimensions resonate with a regenerative approach relevant to local cultural policy. First, *stewardship of the resources of place, identity, and unique potential*, with subthemes including: identifying and emphasizing the unique potentials of a place, its residents, and its identity; promoting cultural revival and local endogenous knowledges and practices; and acts of stewardship for the place and its culture (informed by Owen 2007, Mang and Reed 2012, Dwyer 2018, Teruel 2018, Araneda 2019, Cheer 2020, Matunga et al. 2020, Duxbury et al. 2021, Bellato et al. 2023a, The Tourism CoLab 2024). Second, *collaboration, participation, and inclusion*, with subthemes including: participative approaches; emphasizing inclusion; fostering a sense of community; and promoting collaborative actions to evolve and enact regenerative approaches, catalyse transformations, and contribute to local development (informed by Owen 2007, Mang and

² This ‘other contributions’ category encompasses a range of writings that do not fit neatly into the two themes above but aim to bridge, for example, focusing on ways to transition (Dredge 2022), developing conceptual frameworks informed by indigenous values (Becken and Kaur 2021), and relating regenerative tourism approaches with indigenous communities’ cultural ways of knowing, being and doing tourism (Matunga et al. 2020).

³ The Tourism CoLab is a leading learning and capacity-building organization that supports a global community of practitioners who are rethinking and reframing the tourism system and how they work in it, aiming to advance a paradigm shift towards regenerative tourism that requires deep systems change.

Reed 2012, Pollock 2012, Teruel 2018, Araneda 2019, Mang and Haggard 2016, Matunga et al. 2020, Duxbury et al. 2021, Dredge 2022, Bellato et al. 2023a, The Tourism CoLab 2024).

Methodology

To advance beyond general principles and broad topics, we aimed to identify grassroots practices that operationalized the two cross-cutting dimensions: ‘stewardship of the resources of place, identity, and unique potential’ and ‘collaboration, participation, and inclusion’. In other words, this study examines how these two dimensions are embedded in the practice of local cultural agents. Our first guiding research question is: How do grassroots culture–tourism initiatives contribute to local regenerative dynamics in smaller places? Secondly, we are interested in the development of appropriate policy to enable and sustain this work, which leads to our second guiding research question: How can local policy frameworks support these cross-sectoral initiatives for local development?

This qualitative and exploratory case study research is based on three projects located in three small-city contexts in Portugal: ‘180 Creative Camp Abrantes’, organized by the Municipality of Abrantes in partnership with Canal 180 company, in Abrantes; ‘Bazar à Noite’, organized by Associação Destino Caldas/SILOS Contentor Criativo, in Caldas da Rainha, and ‘Wool é Cool/ Rota da Lã Educa’, organized by WOOL Museum, in Covilhã.

The three small-city contexts are peripheral cities in relation to the national urban and cultural centres of Lisbon and Porto (see Figure 1), but with different geographical, social, economic, and cultural contexts. Within each city, connections between local cultural agents, culture–tourism approach projects, and urban regeneration dynamics were identified. The research previously developed under the CREATOUR project provided prior knowledge of these cities and enabled a close, collaborative relationship with local organizations, facilitating entry into the field and subsequent support for research.

Figure 1. Map showing locations of Abrantes, Caldas da Rainha, and Covilhã, Portugal



Source: Authors.

The research presented here is part of broader research within the INTERMEDIA project that included 27 interviews with local cultural and creative agents from the three cities engaged in projects and initiatives that resonate with urban regeneration dynamics; 8 fieldwork visits to participate in specific projects and events of local cultural agents involved in the study, allowing participatory observation and informal conversations; and 6 fieldwork visits to implement 6 participatory sessions (2 per city). Based on collaborative practices, these sessions engaged cultural and creative agents for consultation, mapping, and diagnosis (urban and cultural context, needs, and expectations as cultural agents and citizens) as well as ideation and prototyping of community-based projects that promote urban regeneration. This approach aimed to foster a research-action flow.

The qualitative data used for this article (deriving from the interviews and fieldnotes) was examined through thematic analysis centred on identifying both similar and distinct elements in each case study regarding topics related to micro-scale and grassroots urban regeneration initiatives, e.g., participation, community engagement, community building, urban regeneration, public space transformation, local commerce dynamization, capacity building, heritage safeguarding and promotion, culture-tourism connection, collaboration, and networking.

The key factors in each case study were then compared and considered together to identify the main areas of action or dimensions that stand out as collectively contributing, first, to the revitalization of local resources, place identity, and building potential, and secondly, to values and actions supporting collaboration, participation, and inclusion within the projects examined. Finally, addressing the second research question, we considered how insights gained through these site-specific cases can inform the design of local policy that fosters regenerative approaches and links culture and tourism for integrated local development.

Case studies

Abrantes

The city of Abrantes

Abrantes, the smallest of the three case study cities, had 16,123 inhabitants in 2021 (INE 2022a). It is located at the very centre of mainland Portugal. Like many other small cities in the interior of Portugal, it is far from the densely urbanized and populated coastal area where most investments and socioeconomic and cultural dynamics are concentrated. It deals with depopulation and difficulties in attracting and retaining people. In comparison to other places in the region, Abrantes is not a major tourism destination. In recent years, the local government strategy to change this scenario has been to increase investments in cultural infrastructures (e.g., the new Iberian Museum of Archeology and Art, opened in 2021).

The organizations

The Municipality of Abrantes, the local administration body, is responsible for promoting the development of the municipality in areas such as health, education, social action and housing, the environment and basic sanitation, spatial planning and urban planning, transport and

communications, public supply, sport and culture, and civil protection (Municipality of Abrantes 2023).

Canal 180 is the first Portuguese television channel entirely dedicated to culture, arts, and creativity. It produces and showcases innovative content by an international network of creators from around the world. By combining internet and television, Canal 180 aims to provide easy access to art and cultural content for a wide audience, broadcasting throughout the world through different cable television operators (Canal 180 2023).

The Municipality of Abrantes and Canal 180 established a partnership to co-develop ‘180 Creative Camp Abrantes’.

The project

‘180 Creative Camp Abrantes’ involved 100 international young participants coming together for a one-week intensive programme of workshops, conferences, demonstrations, public space interventions, discoveries of the territory, concerts, and exhibitions. This annual festival (2013–2018) was a flagship project linked to urban regeneration and creative tourism that combined the cultural and economic dynamism of the territory with the capacity to attract tourists (Vinagre de Castro et al. 2020).

The Camp functioned like an experimental arts lab providing time and space to young creatives to develop and co-create projects through artistic training and collaboration. Participants were challenged to create together in teams using local culture and historical elements as inspiration. Artistic installations were related to the place and local residents enjoyed that. For example, owners of a local ice cream shop decided to do an art mural on its facade after becoming inspired by other installations.

Public space within the historical centre was used for outdoor workshops, art installations, exhibitions, showcases, and small intimate concerts of emerging artists. This approach allowed for a close connection to place while working with its local heritage and identity. Locals and participants could see each other and follow the evolution – or even be a part – of the ongoing projects along the week. Each year, the city gained more public space installations which introduced some freshness and created an informal urban art route. Some installations transformed and revitalized public spaces, providing new perspectives on how people can use them. For example, in 2015, the artistic installation ‘DomestiCITY’ by Colombian artists María Mazzanti and Martín Ramirez challenged local residents to bring old furniture to be refurbished and set up in the public space. This fostered encounters, conversations, and sharing dreams and desires while public space was appropriated and transformed, even if temporarily.⁴

⁴ A video is available here: <https://vimeo.com/145307826>

Local young adults and some cultural associations were engaged in the event’s organization as volunteers or service providers. However, research identified⁵ that the initiative never managed to fully engage the local community, despite organizers’ will to do so. In the Camp’s early years, local residents were suspicious of the initiative and did not understand what and why around 100 young people were doing in Abrantes. By its final years, the local mindset was completely different with local people asking the organizers when the Camp would start and what art projects were expected. However, by this point the project was close to ending its 6-year run.⁶

Caldas da Rainha

The city of Caldas da Rainha

Caldas da Rainha is a small coastal city with 30,442 inhabitants in 2021 (INE 2022b), located approximately 90 km north of Lisbon. It is located within the urbanized and densely populated coastal strip of the country. The city features industrial heritage intertwined with rural features and the art nouveau architecture style of its historical city centre. Known for its thermal springs and ceramics, whether designer/handcrafted or manufactured, it is home to a large community of artisans. With a higher education arts school and a thriving cultural and creative environment and community, Caldas da Rainha was designated a UNESCO Creative City for Crafts and Folk Art in 2019.

The organization

Destino Caldas Association (ADC) is a non-profit organization, created in 2013, with the main goal to contribute to the attraction and retention of creative human capital in Caldas da Rainha, and to manage and dynamize SILOS Creative Container (SILOS). SILOS is a bottom-up creative hub established in 2010 in a former flour mill that incorporates studios for creatives and artists, a cultural venue, and an exhibition gallery. ADC/SILOS has carried out many cultural, scientific, and entrepreneurial events in partnership with public and private entities. In recent years, it has expanded its reach to creative tourism, local commerce activation, and urban regeneration with sociocultural impact (SILOS Creative Container 2023).

The project

‘Bazar à Noite’ (Night Bazaar) is a creative market that occurs monthly during summer months in Praça da Fruta (the fruit market square), plus a Christmas edition in December within an old underused industrial building in the city centre. Created in 2013, aiming to give visibility to the many authors and creatives in Caldas da Rainha, it was discontinued after 4 editions that year. In 2022, the project was resumed and has now implemented 14 editions. Its setting, Praça da Fruta, is the oldest open-air fresh produce market in Portugal. Located at the heart of the historical city centre, it is a unique place that embeds the local identity and where the rural-urban relationship of the Caldas da Rainha region emerges.

⁵ These insights emerged from analyzing several interviews and informal talks with local cultural agents in 2023, and interviews in 2018 with the Creative Camp organizers.

⁶ The partnership was ended by the Municipality after 6 years due to public regulations limiting one-source contracts.

More than a market, Bazar à Noite aims to be a meeting space for independent creatives on a local and regional scale, open to the local community and visitors in a relaxed and familiar environment. The event extends and reinforces the local commerce tradition (e.g., installing a different kind of market at night in the fruit market that functions earlier in the day), activates and dynamizes the public space, and promotes the city's arts and crafts heritage, in particular ceramics and design.

This is an event where local communities and visitors gather, especially the creative community that actively participates to promote and sell their products and to network with other creatives, both local and from other places in Portugal. As an open-air (and open-door, in the case of the Christmas edition) event, it generates a warm social ambience, combining the trading with small cultural events and street food. It can potentially become a flagship project that revitalizes the city centre, the community, and the local economy, and inspires similar projects elsewhere.

Alongside this event, ADC/SILOS has mapped 140 local creators (so far) as a way of better understanding the local reality and its evolution. Following-up from this knowledge, it has been developing and implementing capacity-building workshops for the local cultural and creative community. The objective is to activate, diversify, and innovate local commerce and help ensure the survival of creators by preparing them in areas such as intellectual property, copyright, domain registration and social media management, graphic communication, brand management, and the creation of small businesses and urban markets.

Covilhã

The city of Covilhã

Covilhã is located in the Serra da Estrela mountain range of Portugal, close to the border with Spain, and has 33,691 inhabitants (2021) (INE 2022b). Its urban core extends between 450 and 800 metres in altitude. Since the Middle Ages, the wool industry has driven the region and marked the history of the city and the lives of its inhabitants (Folgado 2009). It has a working-class nature and was once known as the factory city. Today, the textile industry continues to be one of the main economic activities in the region, placing it in a context of living heritage. The city has a public university with its campus integrated in the urban fabric through rehabilitated old industrial spaces and a dynamic cultural and creative community. In 2021, the city was designated a UNESCO Creative City of Design.

The organization

The Wool Museum (MUSLAN) of the University of Beira Interior, was opened to the public in 1996, with a strong commitment to safeguard and revitalize Covilhã's industrial legacy (Pinheiro 2009a). The various centres of MUSLAN, like other university faculties and services, are located in recovered former industrial structures. MUSLAN regularly collaborates with other cultural and social organizations to develop and host activities often focusing on social inclusion through the arts. Since 2002, MUSLAN has been a member of the Portuguese Museum Network, emerging as a dynamic cultural institution dedicated to safeguarding,

conserving, researching, and disseminating the region’s wool industry heritage. The museum comprehensively explores the wool industry’s historical roots from a contemporary perspective, actively promoting an integrated development approach. Moreover, it plays a pivotal role in establishing a European-level textile information network (MUSLAN, 2023).

The projects

The Wool Museum, in partnership with New Hand Lab⁷, developed a creative tourism pilot project within the CREATOUR project. ‘COOLWOOL – Creative weekend in Covilhã’ was a multifaceted event that explored the city’s industrial tradition of wool manufacturing and featured hands-on activities. Although the partnership was not continued after the project, both organizations continue to develop creative tourism activities separately. Here we focus on the subsequent activities of the Wool Museum.

Today, the Wool Museum organizes several routes and guided tours within the city and the region, which show the city’s cultural DNA through its toponymy, the evolution of the urban structure, and the numerous landmarks that link the territory to wool production and industry (Pinheiro 2009b). Combined with this, MUSLAN has organized several workshops related to different techniques and stages of working the wool (such as carding, tainting, weaving and knitting), which recently was established as a full-year workshop programme named ‘Wool é Cool’ (Wool is Cool).

Building on these, the museum developed the ‘Rota da Lã Educa’ (the Wool Route Educates) project, which received funding from the national programme Transformar Turismo (Transform Tourism) in 2023. This project combines landscape and urban regeneration (the recovery of green areas and public space in the surrounding area of the museum) with engaging students and teachers in learning about the wool heritage and its preservation. Aiming to preserve the connection of Covilhã’s urban landscape with its wool heritage, this case illustrates how a culture-based tourism initiative can promote urban space regeneration, preserve and promote heritage, and involve a community (in this case the school community) based on the premise of a positive impact on the sustainability of the territory.

Analysis and critique

Guided by the two cross-cutting dimensions – ‘stewardship of the resources of place, identity, and unique potential’ and ‘collaboration, participation, and inclusion’ – the practices of local cultural agents were examined in the three small cities of Abrantes, Caldas da Rainha, and Covilhã. Through a reflexive process of thematic analysis (Braun et al. 2019; Flick 2018; Krippendorff 2013; Riger and Sigurvinsdottir 2016) the qualitative data from interviews and fieldnotes from site observations of these grassroots initiatives, key points were identified and organized by these two dimensions (see Table 1). This work involved systematically reviewing these detailed notes and transcripts, searching for meaningful recurring ideas, and tagging observations and quotations with appropriate codes, which later facilitated the identification of

⁷ New Hand Lab (NHL) is a creative hub established in 2013 by an informal collective of artists and creators based in the former wool factory Júlio Afonso (NHL 2024).

significant themes. Next, the article authors discussed the emergent themes within each case, and drew out further connections within the contextualized data. Then, the points identified in the individual cases were brought together, compared, and synthesized to articulate common areas of action or dimensions evident in the approaches that relate to a regenerative perspective. During this process, emergent issues and lessons learned in practice were also identified and incorporated into the analysis. This analysis anchors reflections for developing local policy that can support such culture–tourism initiatives.

Table 1. Practices supporting regenerative culture–tourism approaches

Case study	Dimension 1 – Stewardship of the resources of place, identity, and unique potential	Dimension 2 – Collaboration, participation, and inclusion
180 Creative Camp, Abrantes	<p>Artistic co-creation based on local identity and cultural elements</p> <p>Public space revitalization and transformation</p> <p>Growing number of installations changed the city image, attracting visitors and pleasing local residents</p> <p>Art works and installations inspired by and based on local culture, heritage, and identity</p> <p>Participants living, exploring, and intensively working with the city’s elements for a full week</p>	<p>Engages local young people and associations in organizing the event</p> <p>Activities for children</p> <p>Engages and promotes local creatives (via presentations, exhibitions, or as participants)</p> <p>Young art students are engaged in projects (e.g., music students co-creating with musicians)</p> <p>Access for residents to participate in activities in public spaces and free outdoor events</p> <p>Builds capacity of young creators through co-creation and collaborative practices</p>
Bazar à Noite, Caldas da Rainha	<p>Public and private space revitalization</p> <p>Reinforces local economy via linking culture and tourism and innovating the local commerce tradition</p> <p>Strengthens local identity and heritage through creative work (ceramics, design, and creativity)</p> <p>Promotes and builds capacity of local creators’ potential</p>	<p>Inclusive, free-to-visit event open to everyone</p> <p>Opportunity for the broader community’s active and passive participation (gathering point to meet, socialize, network, sell, and shop)</p> <p>Young and emerging creators can showcase and sell their work</p> <p>Fosters local creators’ community building</p>

Case study	Dimension 1 – Stewardship of the resources of place, identity, and unique potential	Dimension 2 – Collaboration, participation, and inclusion
	Encourages dialogue between tradition and contemporary, keeping heritage alive and evolving	Enables networking between local creators and creators from outside
Wool é Cool / Rota da Lã Educa, Covilhã	<p>Wool and industrial heritage (material and immaterial) safeguarding, promotion, and awareness via knowledge transfer and training</p> <p>Urban and (ecological) landscape regeneration in the area surrounding the museum</p> <p>Culture–tourism activities that connect to place through exploration and experimentation</p>	<p>Engages and works with different generations</p> <p>Students and teachers participate</p> <p>Engages former textile workers and fashion design students in creative tourism activities</p> <p>Regular collaboration between the museum and other organizations in the development of projects is essential</p>

Source: Authors.

Dimension 1 – Stewardship of the resources of place, identity, and unique potential

On the basis of key factors identified in each case (Table 1), and considering the three cases together, five areas of action stand out as collectively contributing to the revitalization of local resources, place identity, and building potential: heritage stewardship, encouraging place-inspired creative work, building the capacity of locally-based creators, reinforcing connections to place through tourism and a local economy approach, and using and improving public space.

Local actions focusing on heritage stewardship consider both material and immaterial aspects, in a connecting trajectory ranging from safeguarding and preservation, to promotion and awareness raising through knowledge-sharing initiatives, to active training on techniques and intentional dialogues between tradition and contemporary, keeping heritage alive and evolving. These actions can result in new art works and installations inspired by and based on the local culture, heritage, and identity. This place-inspired creative work (e.g., ceramics, textiles, design, and public art) further strengthens the local identity and its cultural elements and, in a circular way, contributes to safeguarding the continuity and evolution of the local heritage.

This is coupled with a focus on people and building capacities among local residents and visitor-participants. This may focus on building capacities of young creators through co-creation and collaborative practices; addressing needs for skill development among local creator-entrepreneurs, boosting their potential for survival in a highly competitive market; and/or creating frameworks for co-creation and collaborative practices, community building,

and networking. More broadly, attention to the capabilities and capacities of all community members and visitors materializes in transversal training initiatives and programmes.

A central element is an emphasis on strengthening connections to place through active immersion into the local context. This can appear as culture–tourism activities that connect to place through guided exploration and experimentation, or more embedded creative participation through intensive programmes where participants live, explore, and co-create with the place’s elements for a time period. It also appears as culture–tourism activities that reinforce the local economy’s entrepreneurs, such as new approaches to revitalize local commerce traditions, and retain visitors for longer time periods to foster social experiences and a greater knowledge of the place.

The use, revitalization, and potential transformation of public spaces emerge as a foundation for these actions. This may be a defined project of urban and (ecological) landscape regeneration in the area surrounding a cultural institution, or a more organic, iterative process where a growing number of place-inspired art installations in public places can change the city’s image, attracting visitors and pleasing local residents. More ephemerally, actions in public spaces enable encounters between creators/participants and other members of the community in everyday settings, and generate traces of the new uses of a place which carry forward in memory.

Dimension 2 – Collaboration, participation, and inclusion

In each case, collaboration, participation, and inclusion are values that permeate the lead organization and how each functions within its community. Within individual projects, there are intentional actions to engage a variety of local creators, build and strengthen local networks, and establish connections with visitor-participants from outside. Considering the broader local community, significant efforts to involve children and youth, and to foster intergenerational knowledge and skill exchanges are evident.

Regular and visible collaboration between a cultural organization and those from other sectors in developing projects seems to be essential to foster a spirit and habit of cooperation and sharing limited resources. Open involvement of a range of creators in culture–tourism projects promotes networking and collaborative practices among those participating. The projects examined here engage and promote local creatives through workshops, presentations, exhibitions, and other participant roles. Young and emerging creators are encouraged to showcase and sell their own artworks or to work alongside more established artisans and artists. This allows young creators to promote their work and build skills. Moreover, these projects foster community building among local creators and enable networking between local creators, other community groups, and visitor-participants from outside.

Working with younger generations, the culture–tourism projects aim to pass along knowledge and gain new perspectives. Fostering a sense of connection and ownership towards their cultural roots raises awareness and contributes to safeguarding and stewardship of local heritage. Some activities are designed specifically for children, young art students are engaged

in projects (e.g., choir and music students working with musicians in co-creation projects in Abrantes), and groups of students and teachers participate in heritage-based explorations and hands-on workshops. Beyond this level of participation, local young people and associations are engaged in organizing the event itself.

The projects also promote intergenerational engagements, fostering knowledge sharing, storytelling about life experiences and insights, and skill exchanges. In Covilhã, for example, this inclusive approach has engaged former textile workers and fashion design students in creative tourism activities by giving a textile workshop or being a guide tour and storyteller. In Caldas da Rainha, during a ‘Bazar à Noite’ edition, a group of volunteers made 110 flower crowns that were offered to the daytime market vendors the next morning, crowning them queens of the market in a symbolic way. This action reinforced the daytime market–night market relationship and fostered encounters between different social groups.

Public space has a major role in all projects since it works as a place to gather, meet, encounter, socialize and network, learn, co-create, sell, and shop. Developing activities in public spaces and free outdoor events (e.g., workshops, concerts, markets, art installations, presentations, walks, and guided tours) provides open access to the community. These open, free-to-visit initiatives create opportunities for the broader community’s participation. Efforts to keep actions porous and ‘in public view’ allow residents to encounter these activities in public places, recognize the project connections with the place and its heritage(s), and may contribute to enhancing a sense of ownership and pride of place.

Lessons learned towards policy development

While cultural policy approaches that focus on small cities and rural areas are emerging, cross-sectoral connections, participatory place-based approaches, and the ways in which local transformations unfold and place-specific resources influence development tend to be neglected. With this in mind, four themes of lessons learned in the implementation of culture–tourism actions resonate: (1) the need for a hub for collective energies to collaborate; (2) community engagement; (3) time, space, and continuity; and (4) legacies. These lessons provide insights for designing cultural policies in smaller communities to encourage and support culture–tourism entangled projects, acknowledging this symbiotic relationship.

A hub for collective energies to collaborate

In this research, we found that investing in a strategically chosen ‘flagship project’ can serve as a springboard for a sustained, community-driven cultural programme throughout the year with smaller complementary initiatives. These projects can be designed to stimulate collaborative practices among organizations and encourage cross-sectoral cooperation. This can reinforce each organization’s role and position within the local community, extend their scope of action, and encourage sharing of resources. Overall, the design of a local strategy that sets an integrated programme that aggregates and articulates culture, tourism, and other projects/activities from a variety of organizations will avoid the tendency for overlapping and an unbalanced calendar (i.e., a concentration of activities on specific days and other days without programming). This requires an inclusive governance approach and decision-making

mechanisms that actively engage and encourage cultural organizations to collaborate, fostering a sense of collective participation.

Community engagement

This research found that to foster deeper and long-term participation and engagement, it is crucial that it happens on a regular and continual basis. Regular and strategic community engagement actions can, over time, foster a positive mindset change within a community. Such processes should collaboratively seek solutions to pragmatic questions and reflexively discuss common concerns and possible new collaborations. This approach recognizes that the involvement of the broader community can continuously add value to the activities. Furthermore, projects combining tradition and modernity can facilitate the development of connections that link generations. Actions also need to be context-specific, recognizing the specificities of local residents, their histories, motivations, and aspirations. Such strategies should aim to empower the local population and ‘refresh’ local identities, value diverse cultural perspectives and interpretations, and spread benefits widely among community residents.

Time, space, and continuity

Through the case studies, we learned that in a smaller city, a ‘regular’ flow of cultural events and activities throughout the year must be planned and nurtured by combining big events or a flagship project with smaller activities distributed over time, providing diversity, vibrancy, and tackling seasonality. However, a seasonal project can also be good: on one hand, this allows sufficient time and space for preparation, which can be combined or complemented with capacity-building activities at other times of year; on the other hand, season-specific events can heighten expectations for both residents and visitors.

The cases also highlighted that local policy and programmes need to ensure adequate time for projects to be designed, implemented, improved, and consolidated. Projects/activities need to be sustained over time to keep an evolving momentum and build capacity. Established cultural organizations that have an expected continuity (e.g., museums) enable long-term planning, and accumulative knowledge, relationships, and actions. Thus, these institutions could play central roles as collaborative hubs for smaller cultural organizations and professionals.

Legacies

The analysis revealed that a long-term planning and development mindset is fundamental. Projects by nature are not permanent structures or institutions and it is normal that they end, but they can also evolve into an array of spin-off initiatives. In the case of flagship projects with a large local impact, it is crucial to consider alternatives in case a major project ends. This relates not only to the local cultural ecosystem, but maintaining a city’s attraction capacity. A robust cultural development process implies a skilled and prepared cultural community. Capacity building programmes for local residents in culture, tourism, and other sectors can stimulate new ideas and projects. Such programmes could encourage accessible upskilling and capacity-building in several areas and build inter-sectoral mediation skills.

Beyond iterative improvements to public spaces, organizations can be encouraged to use public spaces for activities as accessible and inclusive locations for fostering encounters, and resources for connections and community-building. Strengthening and diversifying a community's connections to place can be fostered by acknowledging and making public a plurality of experiences, perspectives, stories, and histories. These contribute diverse meanings attached to specific places, which can inspire and inform new projects and activities.

Closing remarks

Addressing the relative absence of culture in evolving regenerative scholarship, this study examined the roles of cultural actors and actions within the context of regenerative tourism and development. Derived from the two dominant frameworks for regenerative tourism (Bellato et al. 2023a and The Tourism Colab 2024), the study identified two cross-cutting dimensions of relevance to local cultural policy and practice: 'stewardship of the resources of place, identity, and unique potential' and 'collaboration, participation, and inclusion'. Extending beyond general principles of regenerative tourism found in the literature, we sought to identify what regenerative approaches look like in practice. The research also contributes to the underdeveloped research base on cultural work in small city contexts, providing new empirical evidence and analysis about the way local place-based transformations unfold (responding to Zemite and Kunda 2023), how collaborative 'spaces of possibilities' (Kagan 2023) can be created, and how 'place' (with its specific resources) influences development trajectories (responding to Moriggi 2021).

How do grassroots culture–tourism initiatives contribute to local regenerative dynamics in smaller places? The case studies illustrate how culture–tourism projects in small cities can contribute to regenerative micro-processes within the broader community, whether urban, social, cultural, environmental, and/or economic. These practices, which tend to be complementary to other activities, can actively foster a more vibrant and interconnected local cultural ecosystem while contributing to broader regenerative dynamics within the local context. In the case studies, cultural agents take on 'transformational roles that contribute to the regeneration of themselves, places and communities' (Bellato et al. 2022, 1037) through collaborative actions and strategies. Stewardship of the resources of place, identity, and unique potential is realized through five areas of action: heritage stewardship, encouraging place-inspired creative work, building the capacity of locally-based creators, reinforcing connections to place through tourism and a local economy approach, and using and improving public space. Collaboration, participation, and inclusion tend to be permeating values, operationalized within projects as intentional actions to engage a variety of local creators, to build and strengthen local networks, and to establish connections with visitor-participants from outside. Considering the broader local community, significant efforts to involve children and youth, and to foster intergenerational knowledge and skill exchanges are also evident. We note, however, the often-missing local policy frameworks that could nurture these initiatives for long-term community benefit.

How can local policy frameworks support these cross-sectoral initiatives for local development? Envisioning local cultural policy from a sectorally linking perspective entails

expanding the scope of cultural policy and adopting a more ecosystemic approach that incorporates culture's interdependencies with other spheres of life. Inspired by regenerative tourism as an alternative approach focused on stewardship of place and its resources (Bellato et al. 2022, 2023a, 2023b; Bellato and Pollock 2023), an integrated approach can be aligned with holistic and long-term perspectives to development that explicitly aim to provide value and well-being to the local community, nurture and support cultural vitality, and encourage care and stewardship of place. Crafting 'regenerative culture–tourism policies' at the local level means acknowledging the inherent multidimensionality and cross-sectoral nature of effective cultural strategies, the regenerative strategies and actions mentioned above, and the need for new 'post-extractivist' models of development (Dâmaso and Rex, forthcoming).

We acknowledge that this research is exploratory and is a 'first step' in using conceptual frameworks for regenerative tourism as a research frame to examine local culture–tourism initiatives, and much refinement is still needed. At a theoretical level, further conceptual attention is required to advance understanding of culture within a regenerative thinking framework. We recognize the need for more experimentation in local cultural policy and practice to intentionally support culture–tourism initiatives within a cross-sectoral, ecosystemic approach, accompanied by research closely monitoring and assessing development processes, organizational collaborations, and impacts. Comparative research in different locations and contexts, as well as longitudinal experiments that can track changes and adjustments over time would deepen our understanding of these development processes.

In closing, we stress the importance of community inclusion and investment in a regenerative approach within local communities, coupled with policy frameworks that prioritize holistic sustainability and the well-being of the local community. We emphasize the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration through a close and ongoing dialogue, and between policymakers and local agents. Local agents are potential local solutions providers, reinforcing participatory processes for diagnosis and design of solutions to local problems and attuned to challenges and realities of change-making in the local context. In Portugal, it has only been in recent years that smaller municipalities have designed local cultural policies and strategic plans for culture, and the majority of the 308 municipalities do not have a specifically designed plan. This cross-sectoral policy perspective could be embedded within foundational approaches to link culture and tourism for local development in future policy-making processes.

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