

Experiences of participation, co-design and community development in Ostia Antica Archaeological Park

Listening, participation, involvement: the Park's key words in approaching local communities

Alessandro D'Alessio, Maria Chiara Alati, Marina Lo Blundo

INTRODUCTION

The archaeological Park of Ostia antica comprises various archaeological and monumental sites. The territorial jurisdiction straddles the 10th municipality of Rome and the municipality of Fiumicino, partially including their territory, where the Park performs archaeological, landscape and monumental protection functions. The Park's mission in the area is not limited to protection, but is expressed in relationships and activities involving several local actors. Since its inception, the Park has developed projects for local communities and has welcomed proposals from local stakeholders, starting with schools and associations.

However, it is only in recent years that the Park's strategy towards local communities has moved towards co-design. The aim is to create a continuous dialogue based on listening and involvement, in order to strengthen the Park's role as a cultural meeting point. Participation in two European projects funded by the Creative Europe Programme has made this possible, enabling the Park to acquire specific skills in audience engagement and development. In particular, the activities involving participation, co-design and development of local communities implemented by the Park are based on the ACED Audience Centred Experience Design methodology, acquired by the Park through the AHEAD project capacity building programme.

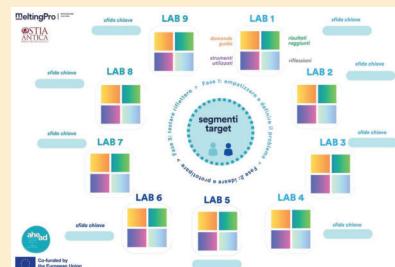


Fig. 1: The project design map used to implement the AHEAD Labs



Fig. 2: The testing phase of the prototype developed by youngsters in AHEAD project: a wellness experience in the Terme del Foro

AHEAD -Accessible Heritage Experience for Audience Development. CREA-CULT-2023-COOP. ID: 101131914)

This small scale project, funded by Creative Europe, was completed in October 2025. It aimed to train cultural heritage specialists in co-design, heritage interpretation, and design thinking, while also transforming the co-creation process into a practical experience. The project included training courses and co-creation workshops with target audience groups, followed by practical experimentation to validate prototypes for implementation.

The Park selected two target groups: students from IIS G. Verne in Acilia, and aged members of the Agro Isola Sacra Association in Fiumicino. Although these two groups are very different from each other, they both represent the wide variety of interests and people that make up the local communities in a relatively small area: the coastline between Rome's 10th municipality and the municipality of Fiumicino.

Following the empathisation phase and direct knowledge of the two groups — an integral part of the ACED methodology — we worked with both target groups. First, we asked them to construct their own personal map of Ostia Antica, starting with a free, unguided visit. After an initial exchange of experiences, the groups worked separately to create two different prototypes of activities that will become part of the park's educational, cultural and recreational offerings by 2026.

Young people associated their walks in the park with feelings such as relaxation, calm, connection with nature, rest, sport and wellbeing. The experience we created consisted of a wellbeing programme at the Terme del Foro, organised in stages that alternated yoga with readings from ancient sources, herbal tea tastings and stories about the thermal baths of the Romans. The Agro Isola Sacra Association aimed to tell about an agricultural area with a history that is as recent as it is hidden by the building speculation of the last decades, but eager to re-emerge and be passed on to future generations. This gave rise to the idea of a parallel narrative of the area, through the common thread of the work of its inhabitants, experimented inside the Necropolis of Porto all'Isola Sacra. References to ancient crafts, illustrated on bricks on the facades of tombs from the 2nd-3rd centuries AD, alternated with descriptions and memories brought first-hand by members of the Association, in a reference to crafts of the past and crafts that are already being lost today.

GREEN HERITAGE – Nurturing a sustainable future in the Gardens of time CREA-CULT-2024-COOP-2. ID 101174141)

Funded by Creative Europe, the Green Heritage project aims to integrate environmental sustainability into cultural heritage education, particularly within archaeological parks, linking the management of these sites with environmental education. It seeks to transform these parks into active classrooms that showcase sustainable practices from the past to inspire contemporary environmental action, while promoting collaboration between educators, heritage managers, and stakeholders across Europe. This collaboration will strengthen environmental and cultural heritage education activities in a systemic, interdisciplinary, and pedagogically innovative way. To this end, the project has developed a specific pedagogical framework for joint heritage and environmental education, setting out innovative methodologies, criteria, tools, models and good practices. While the main target audience is adolescents (13–18 years old), the project lends itself to the development of activities for a wide range of age groups. At the same time, a network of experts is being established to set up an international community of practice that can support cultural institutions and parks in launching educational projects. The study visits to the various project partners provided an opportunity for each partner to learn about good practices developed at different archaeological sites and discuss approaches in relation to different contexts. The project also includes a gamification element, involving the creation of Minecraft scenarios set in various archaeological settings, developed in collaboration with local school students. Thanks to the project, the archaeological parks will serve as 'living laboratories' where researchers and visitors can experiment with eco-friendly conservation techniques, learn about climate adaptation strategies, and explore the intersection between cultural identity and environmental responsibility. The archaeological area of the ports of Claudius and Trajan (Fiumicino) will host co-design activities with the ultimate goal of educating people about archaeological, environmental and landscape heritage, focusing on the close interrelationships between archaeological and natural components at all levels. The project will end in 2027, entering into the heart of co-designing activities during 2026.



Fig.3 Meeting the community of Isola Sacra during the study visit in Ostia antica for the Green Heritage project

NEW STRATEGIC PLAN FOR OSTIA ANTICA ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARK

The new strategic project for the Park, under development, is based on the idea that the Park should act as a reference point and catalyst for the area's social, cultural and artistic resources, in a context that is not always easy but extremely rich in these resources. The project aims to promote initiatives that involve the community at any level. For this reason, the definition of the strategic axes and medium or long-term activities will be shared with the neighbouring communities. Participatory and involvement methods will be experimented with in the design of the plan through extensive consultation with various institutional components, as well as the social, economic and educational community, and cultural and political operators at various levels. To this end, the Park is launching a wide-ranging public consultation, involving expressions of interest, working tables and focus groups. This will enable the consultation to reflect the many demands of the local area with regard to its relationship with the Park, using the methodologies acquired through ongoing projects. This approach is not yet widespread among cultural institutions, but Ostia antica intends to establish it as a standard operating procedure and a stylistic feature. This will combine the protection of its heritage with the promotion of a sense of belonging to the territory and identity, and the enhancement of historical memory and its values, also encompassing the tangible and intangible cultural aspects that remain there.

REFERENCES

AHEAD -Accessible Heritage Experience for Audience Development.
CREA-CULT-2023-COOP. ID: 101131914

<https://aheadeurope.eu>

Coordinator: Melting Pro

Working group Ostia: Maria Chiara Alati, Dario Daffara, Marina Lo Blundo, Paola Francesca Rossi



Co-funded by
the European Union

GREEN HERITAGE – Nurturing a sustainable future in the Gardens of time
CREA-CULT-2024-COOP-2. ID 101174141

<https://greenheritageproject.org>

Coordinator: Institute of Archaeology of Belgrade

Working group Ostia: Maria Chiara Alati, Dario Daffara, Marina Lo Blundo, Claudia Irene Mornati, Paola Francesca Rossi



Co-funded by
the European Union

CONTACTS: Alessandro D'Alessio | Archaeologist, Director of PAO | alessandro.d'alessio@cultura.gov.it | pa-oant@cultura.gov.it | Phone: 39.3391878771

CONTACTS: Maria Chiara Alati | PhD Architect | mariachiara.alati@cultura.gov.it | Phone: 39.342.9749579

CONTACTS: Marina Lo Blundo | Archaeologist | marina.loblundo@cultura.gov.it | Phone: 39.349.9360309