(RE)CONNECTING COMMUNITIES TO VERNACULAR HERITAGE: THE ROLE OF PARTICIPATION IN PRESERVING *GENIUS LOCI*

RIM MENIA[1], HELENA GONÇALVES PINTO[2], MADDALENA ACHENZA[3]

Resumo | Abstract

Vernacular heritage surpasses the material aspects of the building, involving greater considerations of its associated values (Laing, 2020). Highlighted in the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage (1999), these values are intangible aspects embedded in vernacular structures in local know-how, *Genius Loci*, and symbolic significance. Such values evolve over time, as heritage assets continuously acquire cultural significance within their communities (Castillo-Reyes et al., 2022).

In this sense, vernacular heritage provides a space for the manifestation of memories, identities, and sense of belonging or ownership (Alonso González, 2015; Tomasi & Barada, 2021; Elhamy & Wahba, 2022). Recent research argues for the importance of considering *Genius Loci* in conservation to preserve the immateriality of vernacular heritage (Alves, 2017) and to recognize its evolving social dimensions (Chen & Wang, 2024). However, this approach to conservation cannot be achieved without community involvement (ICOMOS, 1999).

While key instruments such as the Faro Convention (2005), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Kyoto Vision (2012), and the ICOMOS Madrid-New Delhi Document (2017) played a pivotal role in integrating community participation within conservation discourse, the voice of *Genius Loci* remains ignored (Petrušonis, 2018). Within this context, this research builds upon the framework proposed by Cuckemane et al. (2025), which explores the nexus between *Genius Loci*, heritage, and vernacular architecture, by introducing «participatory agency» as a fourth variable. While this framework categorizes the attributes of *Genius Loci*, it reveals an epistemological gap regarding the agents of this nexus: communities.

Through a qualitative methodology, this paper critically examines the role, forms, and approaches of participation by communities-of-interest and communities-of-place in preserving *Genius Loci*, and questions the place of *Genius Loci* in conservation, particularly in adaptive reuse operations. Ultimately, this research aims at establishing a theoretical framework at the nexus of *Genius Loci*, vernacular heritage, and community participation.

[1] Autonomous University of Lisbon, Polytechnic Institute of Tomar & Centre for Technology, Restoration and Art Enhancement (TECHN&ART) (Portugal).
[2] History, Territories and Communities-CFE, NOVA FCSH (Portugal).
[3] DICAAR - University of Cagliari (Italy).

Palavras-chave | Keywords

Genius Loci; vernacular heritage; heritage management; participatory and adaptive reuse.

Resumo biográfico | Short biography

Rim Menia is a PhD Candidate in Heritage, Technology and Territory at the Autonomous University of Lisbon (Portugal) and the Polytechnic Institute of Tomar (Portugal). She holds an architect diploma from École Polytechnique d'Architecture et d'Urbanisme (Algeria) and a Master's Degree in Cultural Landscapes and Heritage (Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree DYCLAM+). Her research focuses on earthen and vernacular built heritage, citizen participation, and community management of heritage. Rim is a member of the Centre for Technology, Restoration and Art Enhancement (TECHN&ART) at the Polytechnic Institute of Tomar.