‘Cultural policy through new lenses of analysis;
technological acceleration in the era of metamodernism’

Abstract

As the world keeps pace with the departure from postmodernism, cultural heritage is among the numerous disciplines called to reinvent their role. Or else become redundant along with the many other domains sidelined by the unprecedented technological penetration in everyday life. However, when asked what the future of cultural heritage holds - or what it looks like - it is essential to ask ourselves, which future? Between the transformative power of digital media and the intensified urbanisation and environmental issues, forecasting the future requires factoring in myriads of first-time-seen developments and possible implications, rendering the task particularly complicated.

Considering how the physical and the virtual worlds bleed into each other, creating new realms of cognitive experience, it is safe to argue that it is not only our engagement with cultural assets that transforms but also our understanding of the heritage discourse altogether. As of 2021, Greece officially joined the smart turn, seeking to elevate a wide range of national economy strands. For some, digital transformation is seen as a much-awaited, revitalising response. At the same time, it appears to act as a barrier for others. Scholars stress the manifold implications embedded in the scenarios of a technologically mediated future, raising concerns about the adequacy of the tools at hand to grasp them. As we sway through eras of extraordinary change, we must consider two things: one, can cultural policy expand and stretch to its progression, and two, can the discipline pave the way for directing the exponential technological acceleration to safekeeping our human heritage?

Keywords

cultural heritage, interpretive policy analysis, metamodernism

Introduction

Discussing the transformation of cultural heritage is an inherently complex undertaking that necessitates an interrogation of the intellectual and technological shifts currently underway. The cultural heritage discourse, deeply intertwined with disciplines such as history, archaeology, and memory studies, must now accommodate the fluidity of modern identities and the pervasive influence of digital media (Pranskūnienė & Zabulionienė 2023; Lowenthal 1997). In the last few years, digital platforms have made the real-time exchange of ideas entirely possible - when not necessary - rendering the boundaries that once defined heritage increasingly permeable. Both the dissolution of spatial and temporal constraints and the emergence of the concept of 'glocal' call for further research into how the heritage discourse progresses and the available analytical tools at hand.

It is safe to argue that digital advancements have transformed how we interact with our 'cultural heritages' [Greek: '*πολιτιστικές κληρονομιές'* (Δρίνης 2023: 11)], dissolving boundaries between local and global scales (Ozer & Swhartz 2025). This evolving digital landscape offers new pathways for researching and understanding heritage by incorporating insights from a broad suite of disciplines, including humanities, social sciences and information technologies. From immersive media and virtual exhibitions to the extensive digitisation efforts in archiving, it is not only our perception of the discourse that has significantly altered but also the way in which heritage is experienced (Economou 2015: 215) as the adoption of new tools and smart solutions allow us to engage with heritage in ways that are both deeply personal and widely accessible (Mihr 2022). Integrating smart city (SC) policies with cultural heritage strategies is a practical application of this emerging shift. In this regard, cultural heritage is simultaneously understood as a context-specific, place-embedded resource and as an element of global significance that can be disseminated and reinterpreted through digital means, a process often referred to as 'glocal' (ibid: 15).

All the aforementioned developments allow contemporary research to revisit longstanding theories and shed light on complex cultural patterns, offering a new lens of analysis. More importantly, we are invited to challenge the capacities of our current worldviews and engage with approaches that acknowledge the local specificity of cultural practices while, at the same time, considering their worldwide relevance. While postmodernism highlighted the contingent and fragmented nature of meaning-making, the pervasive penetration of digital technologies into everyday life has enabled dialogue between global and local scales and, consequently,

allowed for new approaches to surface. The departure from postmodernism marks not only the advent of a new intellectual stance but also a reconfiguration of our collective understanding of heritage. Having long served as a critical framework for understanding cultural phenomena, postmodernism encouraged us to question grand narratives and embrace fragmented meanings. However, as digital technologies stream forward, environmental challenges intensify, and socio-political landscapes evolve in unexpected ways, its sceptical lens appears to lack the capacity to engage with the complexities of a digitally interconnected and environmentally precarious world. On the contrary, the emergent concept of metamodernism attempts to ground a new framework that reconciles the uncertainties of postmodern thought with a persistent, even if provisional, search for meaning (Hutcheon 2002; Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010) and, therefore, possibly offering a new lens through which heritage may be re-envisioned (ibid).

Vermeulen and van den Akker (ibid) played a pivotal role in popularising the term 'metamodernism', proposing that the shift from postmodernism constitutes an entirely new intellectual framework observable in the arts and cultural heritage sectors. Although Vermeulen and van den Akker did not originate the term, their work has been influential in framing metamodernism as a response to the perceived exhaustion of postmodern thought (Sanchez Saura 2019: 291), especially regarding a new 'digitalised, postindustrial, global age' (Metamoderna 2025). Although the concept has not yet gained traction in cultural heritage studies, recent research indicates that the rapid pace of global change will eventually render a strictly postmodern approach inadequate for its analysis. Scholars maintain that the transformations in modern culture 'go beyond the postmodern style of the late 20th century' (Islam 2022: 8) and argue that even though 'the discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on … post-postmodernism needs a new label of its own, and … therefore, [challenges] readers to find it—and name it for the twenty-first century' (Hutcheon 2002: 181). Several researchers have attempted to answer Hutcheon's call (Kirby 2006; Lipovetsky 2005; Samuels 2007). Although their findings do not converge on a single definition, their work suggests an emerging shift in our perception of the world. This transformation is primarily intellectual, yet its manifestation has been signalled by a range of critical political, historical, and environmental events, including but not limited to climate degradation, heightened socio-political conflicts, and recurring economic crises.

The enhanced accessibility of transnational news and real-time communication has facilitated the exchange of information while serving as a medium for articulating globally relevant

concerns and struggles. Recent instances of this phenomenon of 'glocal', interconnected activism include the Global Climate Strikes, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, and the #MeToo demonstrations. The influence of metamodernist perspectives is particularly present among the younger generation as well. Millennials and members of Generation Z, having grown up immersed in digital culture and social media, increasingly self-identify as global citizens (Bourn 2018). Empirical studies suggest that these groups exhibit a dual orientation, demonstrating both a commitment to their local communities and an engagement with broader global responsibilities (Ekici 2023). Their worldviews are continuously reshaped by active participation in online communities, enabling them to join in international discussions and reflect on those discussions within local contexts. Moreover, these generations simultaneously grapple with pervasive political cynicism, a sentiment arising from recurrent economic crises and pressing environmental challenges. This complex interplay of digital engagement and contemporary socio-political pressures informs their creative outputs and patterns of media consumption, thereby calling attention to the multifaceted impact of digitisation on the cultural and intellectual landscape.

The study of the heritage discourse has undergone notable changes in recent decades, shaped by a range of historical and socio-political developments in a globalised public arena. Whereas earlier approaches aimed to capture the full complexity of cultural heritage by continuously adding categories and expanding registry lists, current research stresses the need for a more cohesive and integrated understanding of the discourse (Harrison & Sterling 2023). This shift echoes Lowenthal's earlier observations that heritage is omnipresent—'the past is everywhere' (Lowenthal 1985: x) and 'all at once is heritage everywhere' (Lowenthal 1997: ix)—underscoring the need for a unified reconceptualisation that accommodates the complexity of cultural experience. This paper situates cultural heritage within the broader context of metamodernist thought, arguing that digital innovation and smart urban policies necessitate a new envisioning of heritage's role in global cultural policy scripts.

Research motivation & primary questions

Recent international initiatives, such as the 2030 Agenda, the New Urban Agenda, the Post-2015 Dialogues, and the New European Bauhaus Initiative, have contributed to a growing consensus on the key role of cultural heritage in urban development. At the same time, both academics and policy stakeholders stress the need for innovative, rehumanising approaches to

understanding urban environments (Georgiou 2024). While various parties and policy-relevant actors now increasingly acknowledge and - to different extents - grasp the economic, political, and social dimensions of development, the cultural component often remains ‘misunderstood, undervalued, or perceived as an additional element that can be addressed only after the more fundamental aspects of development are completed' (Duxbury et al. 2016: 6).

From 360° virtual tours to social media engagement, digital tools have become integral to accessing, interpreting, and managing cultural heritage. The European Commission (2024) highlights their value across sectors—research, education, creative industries, and tourism—while data processing and storage advancements have pushed for more ‘democratised’ heritage access (Economou 2015: 216). Surprisingly, this digital transformation works in two directions. As digital practices deepen our interpretive engagement with the past, they also reflect contemporary values more than historical realities (ibid). Digital heritage expands participation, inviting diverse communities to debate representation, site management, and stewardship. However, this broader reach does not - or should not - shield it from critique (DeSilvey & Harrison 2019: 241). Scholars also question whether the focus on digital management tools diverts attention from the interpretive and analytical dimensions of the discourse, while the emergence of new digital genres and the involvement of technologies such as AI-powered agents and bots complicate the traditional role of curatorship in the cultural heritage sector (Cameron 2021: 5).

Such extensive penetration has had a profound effect on communication, information access, and the delivery of digital services. This broad adoption has also led to a reassessment of the audience’s role in the heritage discourse. Digital media’s capacity to mediate immersive experiences has eliminated geographical and temporal barriers, making heritage sites and traditions more accessible. However, despite the aforementioned benefits, the relationship between smartness and cultural heritage has been described as ‘abstract’ (Angelidou 2017: 3) and ‘fuzzy’ (Desdemoustier et al. 2019: 129) and while the smart city (SC) narrative is prominent in international policy discussions, recent research indicates that smart city (SC) policies can potentially destabilise, or even contribute to the collapse of, established urban heritage ecosystems (Visser 2019).

In contemporary SC agendas, cultural heritage is often disseminated as a touristic asset or a civic necessity. While cities like Amsterdam integrate heritage into sustainable urban living, others, like Barcelona and London, promote it as an instrument of cultural branding or tourism

development (Angelidou 2017). Smart cities like Tarragona and Budapest link cultural heritage to branding and sustainability, while others, like Karlsruhe, integrate it under tourism (Angelidou & Stylianidis 2020). In practice, international SC policies increasingly incorporate heritage, yet often as fragmented initiatives lacking a unified vision (Zubizarreta et al. 2016) preventing research from understanding its evolving role in the urban intelligence discourse (ibid) or even the criteria and beneficiaries of the smart status arguing that a solution deemed smart for some may act as a barrier for others (Maye & Claisse 2022). This uneven integration reflects diverse understandings of cultural heritage and its role in the future but, more importantly, stresses the need for further research on how SC agendas are designed and implemented.

Observing how governing bodies in the cultural heritage sector - as well as governmental and state authorities - gradually recognise the need to embrace digitalisation is particularly important, as it provides insight into how high-level policymakers and key stakeholders interpret this potential. Internationally, policy documents now emphasise the strategic significance of new technologies in advancing priorities such as innovation, competitiveness, and sustainability (i2010 Initiative 2005–2009; Europeana PRO 2023; Digital Agenda for Europe 2010; 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development). Consequently, the discourse surrounding smart cities has evolved from earlier debates on digital cities and related frameworks. In parallel, several European developments have been actively promoting cultural heritage; for example, initiatives such as the Horizon 2020 100 million grant, the European Parliament's report on cultural heritage potential, and the European Cultural Heritage Year recommendation support this agenda. Renewed interest in heritage has emerged as its role is increasingly explored within other expanding domains, leading to valuable intersections among different discourses and shifting the focus toward the influence of cultural heritage in major policy decisions (Chianese et al. 2014).

Along the same lines, to keep pace with the ongoing policy forecasts and investment trails (Jiménez Rios *et al.* 2024), numerous state administrations swiftly sought to join the smart turn by integrating digital tools and piloting smart frameworks - among them, Greece. The Greek State's recent undertaking is particularly exciting as it represents a seminal moment in the nation's administrative evolution and the broader discourse on smart governance. For the first time, Greece has launched a controlled, nationwide initiative to adopt smart solutions at the city and national levels, marking a transition from ad hoc digital experiments to a coordinated, top-down policy approach. This initiative represents a strategic pivot in public administration,

where digital transformation is employed to modernise services and integrate cultural heritage and regional identities within the broader concept of urban smartness.

There are two things to consider here. First, this instance offers an opportunity to examine and analyse the interplay between high-level stakeholders' intentions and their practical implementation on the city level. The controlled environment created by the NRRP [1] allows for a systematic investigation into how the Greek State navigates the challenges of digital reorganisation, particularly in integrating innovative technologies within the pre-existing administrative and cultural frameworks. Second, it allows a deeper understanding of the mechanisms and policy-making processes through which governmental actors articulate and mediate the relationship between preserving cultural heritage and embracing technological innovation. Through investigating the policy-relevant aspects of the digital transformation of the public sector, this paper aims **(A) to identify to what extent cultural heritage informs Greek SC policies as seen by primary stakeholders and decision-makers and (B) to investigate the relationship between cultural heritage and 'urban smartness'** (Angelidou et al. 2020: 959) across three model Greek SC cases. Ultimately, this research seeks to forecast how these intentions will shape the future of the cultural heritage discourse in urban policy scripts and whether the convergence of the two domains has the potential to safeguard the centrality of identity and human heritage in the 'digitalised, postindustrial, global age' (Metamoderna 2025).

Method & limitations

The primary methodological framework adopted in this research is Interpretive Policy Analysis (IPA). Given the a priori interpretive nature of the research questions, selecting Interpretive Policy Analysis (IPA) was a necessary methodological decision. IPA is particularly well suited to examining the public policy domain because it focuses on uncovering the underlying meanings and intentions that shape policy decisions as it enables a critical approach to the foundations of public management by challenging the assumed 'scientific basis of administrative practices' (Yanow 2007: 111). Rooted in phenomenology, IPA contends that meaning is not solely derived from quantitative data but emerges from lived experiences, where different actors – or 'interpretive communities' (Yanow 2007: 115) – attribute different and often conflicting meanings to policy phenomena.

This constructivist approach was chosen to facilitate a focused interpretation of specific organisational practices and principles, acknowledging the diversity of lived experiences. In this context, IPA was employed both to enhance our understanding of the actions, interactions, and intentions of policy actors (Yanow 1996: 5) and to provide a sound foundation for future research. Unlike traditional positivist approaches that address policy issues through cost-benefit analyses or objective measures of impact, IPA investigates how various actors construct and negotiate the meaning of policies. As Yanow (1996) notes, policy analysis traditionally aims to 'inform some audience – traditionally the policymaker' by clarifying not only what policies state but also what they imply. In this study, IPA explores how policy actors understand and articulate concepts such as cultural heritage and smart city (SC) strategies, thereby challenging the assumption that policy knowledge is purely objective.

The selection of research units proceeded in two phases. Initially, a preliminary inquiry was conducted to map available data from Municipalities engaged in piloting SC projects or part of consortia developing SC solutions. Since the research was designed before the official launch of the NRRP, Municipalities such as Athens and Trikala emerged as prominent cases. Until 2020, Trikala had received significant international attention for digitising its services, while Athens had recently celebrated the appointment of its first Chief Digital Officer and the establishment of the Athens Digital Council. However, it soon became apparent that only a limited number of Municipalities had structured plans for integrating SC solutions. In many instances, SC projects were initiated as part of European-funded projects rather than a comprehensive city-wide policy, resulting in minimal and unsystematic data. Based on specific selection criteria [2], cases were chosen if they met the NRRP's quality and financial requirements (Hellenic Republic 2022), demonstrated international recognition of best practices, and provided sufficient publicly available materials.

Consequently, the final research units selected were SC Athens, SC Trikala, and SC Heraklion. Notably, Heraklion was included because it had implemented several digitisation projects prior to publishing its SC strategic roadmap in 2016 and hosts one of the first dedicated IT departments in the Greek local government. Because IPA heavily relies on uncovering 'local knowledge' (Yanow 2000: 31), data for this analysis is drawn from multiple sources, following the selection of research units and several data sources were identified to pinpoint potential interviewees and access site-specific knowledge. Following IPA, the sources comprised: (a) written documents (e.g. official policy documentation, committee hearings, Municipal transcripts, official website texts, and policy directives), (b) oral data (i.e. interviews with local

governance actors and other identified policy-relevant stakeholders including Municipal officials, strategic advisors, and other decision-makers, and (c) empirical observations (including acts, interactions, and other observable characteristics of the community). Central documents outlining each unit's SC strategy were gathered and, when necessary, translated.

The analytical process is organised in systematic phases. The first phase involves a naïve reading of all texts and transcripts, intended to develop an initial understanding of the data and specifically local sources of meaning (Yanow 1996). This is followed by an iterative reading process, during which preliminary themes and patterns are identified (main categories). The analysis then moves into an open coding phase in which meaning units are generated inductively from the data rather than imposed by prior assumptions. Following this, the initial codes are refined and re-organised into main categories and subcategories through a second-cycle coding process (Strauss & Corbin 1990). This category-based analysis, as described by Kuckartz (2019), provides a structured means of revealing the implicit architecture of policy interpretations and making explicit the differences in meaning as expressed by various policy actors.

Interviewing policy stakeholders was integral to capturing the 'contextualised' and 'situation-specific' nature of meaning-making (Yanow 2000: 112). Semi-structured interviews, averaging one hour and conducted via various means (phone, video, or in-person), enabled follow-up questions to clarify hesitations. Elite interviewees—defined here as those holding top-tier positions such as designers and implementers of SC strategies—were targeted despite challenges in access due to their guarded positions (Hunter 1993; Mikecz 2012). Their participation was essential for revealing insights that might remain inaccessible through other qualitative methods.

Limitations of this approach include the inherent difficulties in interviewing elites, such as negotiating gatekeeping, confidentiality issues, and the influence of the researcher's own positionality on the interpretation of data (Harvey 2010; Morris 2009). These factors, coupled with the possibility of manipulated or withheld information, must be acknowledged. Nevertheless, the multiple case study design provided a more comprehensive understanding at the national level and reassured participants regarding their anonymity to the fullest extent possible (Saunders et al. 2015). Moreover, ethical considerations were central to the research design. Data have been anonymised to protect the identities of all participants, a measure that is especially important given the sensitive nature of interviews with elite policy actors (Harvey

2010). Informed consent was obtained in writing from all interviewees, and participants were provided with detailed information regarding the research objectives, their rights to withdraw, and the procedures for data handling.

Ultimately, employing IPA for the scope of this research suggests a conscious methodological choice given how interpretive methods allow research to examine public policy in ways that move beyond the conventional focus on quantifiable outcomes. By integrating data from official policy documents, high-profile interviews, cross-case analysis of the research units, and a systematic process based on thematic analysis and category-based coding, the study aims to define the interpretive dimensions and 'communities of meaning' (Yanow 2000: 37) that inform SC policy initiatives. This methodological approach is intended to provide an understanding of how policy actors and policy-relevant stakeholders construct meaning in relation to SC strategies and seek to lay the groundwork for future empirical investigations into the connections between cultural heritage and public management.

Key findings from the selected case studies

- *SC Athens*

The findings addressing the first research question are plentiful; cultural heritage is positioned differently within individual sub-strategies. However, it does not appear to be a central policy area. In most instances, the cultural heritage strand is used as a medium to pilot digital initiatives - it is primarily one channel through which specific priorities, such as 'engagement', are implemented. For example, on the Athens Digital Lab website, 'culture' is paired with 'tourism' under a joint category, with an explicit emphasis on achieving national tourism targets and harvesting data to 'best meet the needs of these travellers [..] and fulfil their needs and desires' (Athens Digital Lab 2017). In this case, cultural heritage functions as a vehicle to reach designated audiences and meet predefined objectives. Despite the overarching goals of smart city (SC) agendas to enhance social participation and citizen engagement, the case of SC Athens hints towards an infrastructure-focused approach.

Beyond the objective of increasing 'touristic influx' (Municipality of Athens 2018: 4), there is little to no indication of culture-centric or heritage-centric goals on the overall SC strategy that might elevate the available content or services—whether these adhere to national or regional

place-making guidelines. At first glance, the policy framework might suggest that cultural heritage is a stand-alone priority; however, the underlying ambition appears to be employing cultural and heritage-related strategies to cater to audience needs and collect data on travel preferences. Interview data provide additional insight into the factors restricting cultural heritage establishment as an independent policy area. First, they reveal an extremely instrumental role assigned to cultural heritage within planning and policy frameworks. Second, the limited resources within the Municipality have forced heritage initiatives to take a secondary role compared to other overarching priorities (i.e. e-governance, access). Third, the insufficient staffing and relatively low levels of digital literacy among municipal employees have accentuated the need to clarify the division of labour. Moreover, the fragmented ownership of cultural heritage assets within the jurisdiction of the Municipality further complicates the process, making information access strenuous and time-consuming.

It is essential to consider that, primarily driven by the challenges above, the processes for digitally transforming the Municipality unfold with a notable sense of urgency; therefore, there is a pressing need to establish a shared understanding of what the said digital transformation translates to. This absence of a common language adversely impacts decision-making processes, ranging from clarifying roles to adopting new operational practices. As one participant remarked, beginning work in the Municipality felt ‘like a Czechoslovak Admiral […] because you are in charge, a Czechoslovak, because you don't have a navy’ (Participant 01 2022: 7). The recurring issue of fragmentation is evident in two primary domains: first, in the user or visitor experience, where similar services are offered by multiple departments, and second, in the management of cultural heritage assets—such as buildings, artefacts, and sites—where overlapping responsibilities and fragmented ownership complicate effective stewardship. This disjointed ownership of cultural heritage assets results in a labour-intensive process that hinders efforts to clarify roles and implement standard protocols. Additionally, while stakeholders with varying levels of engagement are recognised as agents of innovation, their contributions often remain sporadic and narrowly focused. Lastly, the fact that there is one primary—if not sole—donor for cultural initiatives raises essential questions regarding its impact and issues related to cultural ownership, warranting further investigation.

- *SC Trikala*

Cultural heritage is critical in strategic planning despite its limited visibility in formal public documentation. The deliberate decision to invest in local heritage assets serves a dual function: it reinforces a site-specific focus. It contributes to a place-making process, both of which enhance visibility and help to construct an international brand for the city. Moreover, beyond its functional role in consolidating strategy, cultural heritage is vested with additional layers of meaning. In the case of SC Trikala, cultural heritage—whether manifest in tangible forms such as museums or conservatories or intangible expressions like folk songs, traditional dances, and local festivities—is repeatedly highlighted during interviews as a distinguishing feature of the city.

The multifaceted asset of local heritage is seen not merely as a monetisation source but as a strategic pillar with significant potential to be highlighted and elevated through the SC strategy and contemporary digital tools. The Municipality pursues various activities, from collaborations with the Veria Central Public Library [3] to creating skateparks and historically themed QR routes for schools and visitors. Here, cultural heritage is not a supplementary element but a core component of the strategy—integral to the city's historical preservation and contemporary identity while also serving as an economic accelerator and a bridge between diverse sectors, from community engagement to business development.

The Municipality's approach is further evidenced by its establishment of an in-house ICT office, management of digital projects, and leverage of European grants. This strategic decision consolidates the Municipality's role as a competent partner in transnational networks and consortia and safeguards its decision-making authority. At the same time, the approach emphasises the importance of a regional policy framework structured around local assets, thereby reducing potential resistance from the local populace. Such resistance is particularly likely in the case of pilot projects—like the introduction of 5G or driverless buses—that often attract criticism. The strategy operates on both a practical and symbolic level by prioritising social acceptance and trust through place-based goals.

In this light, 'smartness' emerges as a flexible concept adaptable to regional characteristics rather than serving as a one-size-fits-all solution. The case of Trikala demonstrates that smart solutions can take diverse forms, from smart farming to digital museums, and that technology is diffused horizontally across municipal sectors, reforming procedures and services rather than being confined to vertical, isolated policy areas. Moreover, the strategy's place-based focus

prioritises community participation, viewing residents as active contributors rather than mere end users.

In summary, the SC policy implemented by the Municipality of Trikala appears to be the product of careful reflection on social objectives (Trencher 2018: 2) and points toward a paradigm shift in smart city development—often referred to as smart city 2.0. However, the fact that cultural heritage is not explicitly documented in official policy texts, despite its systematic prioritisation, suggests that strategic roadmaps may be tailored to meet external funding criteria. Furthermore, while cultural initiatives are disseminated through social media channels, their omission from primary policy documents may reflect a deliberate categorisation of priorities. This paradox calls for further analysis regarding the formal and informal mechanisms through which cultural heritage is incorporated into smart city agendas.

- *SC Heraklion*

Concerning the first research question—to what extent cultural heritage informs policymaking—evidence indicates that culture has been one of the three core identities envisaged for Heraklion when the Municipality embarked on its digital transformation. Heraklion, associated with at least three different civilisations and internationally recognised for the Knossos Archaeological site and Minoan cultural legacies dating back to 3500 BC, clearly integrates its historical past into its local identity and economic fabric. Consequently, cultural heritage occupies a relatively expanded role within the current SC policy, offering substantial potential for promotion and enhancement via digital tools. Interestingly, interviews with policy officials reveal that in contrast to the Municipality of Trikala, cultural heritage in Heraklion is primarily understood through archaeological and classical terms. Despite the vast presence of intangible heritage in everyday Cretan life— manifested by traditional celebrations, folk songs, agricultural practices, and local celebrations—these elements remain underacknowledged in formal policy frameworks.

Heraklion's strategic approach reflects an early and proactive engagement with new technological solutions. Among the initial projects undertaken was the digitisation of the City Archives, which included newspapers, artworks, photographs, and historical cart portals, spanning materials from as early as the 1960s, as well as archives inherited from the Venetian and Ottoman periods. This initiative was undertaken with 'ITE' ('Foundation for Research and Technology-Hellas'). Similarly, the digitisation of the Municipal Gallery archive—housing an

extensive catalogue of Cretan artists—was prioritised, and a dedicated digital channel was established for original content creation and online streaming. Initially designed as a policy measure to support local cultural heritage and Cretan artists, the digital channel has since evolved to include interviews, online workshops, seminars, and collaborative projects with institutions such as the Greek National Opera. The Municipality demonstrates an advanced awareness of the necessity for evolution and transformation. Beyond digitisation, it has actively generated new content and services utilising SC solutions. Notably, the Municipality has repeatedly self-funded cultural projects. Policy officials have articulated the importance of the city's cultural past, albeit primarily about what are regarded as high-status art forms. This approach offers insight into which cultural heritage elements are considered worth investing in and promoting through a formal, top-down strategy.

Concerning the second research question—the relationship between cultural heritage and 'urban smartness'—the data indicate that SC Heraklion's conceptualisation is driven by mid-level municipal actors rather than top-tier governance. Participants stressed the need for enhanced guidance from central administrative bodies regarding strategic planning for SC solutions. The process has involved significant efforts to persuade higher-ranking officials to advance agendas related to smartness, often amid complex bureaucratic procedures. Personal connections facilitate communication in this mid-sized urban context, yet they also introduce informal decision-making dynamics that resist formal evaluation.

In Heraklion, 'smartness' is primarily propelled by the initiatives of municipal employees addressing practical needs across various sectors. Rather than solely targeting urban challenges, SC strategies in Heraklion are employed to boost the local economy and enhance the Municipality's brand identity. The integration of cultural heritage is intricately linked with the city's tourist potential—crucial in a regional economy where tourism can constitute up to 80% of income (Participant 05 2023). Importantly, stakeholders emphasise that capitalisation extends beyond financial accumulation or technological growth; it derives from associating the Municipality with internationally acclaimed cultural assets, elevating Heraklion's brand identity and expanding its access to funding and international visibility.

- **Relevance/ Discussion**

The three strategies differ in structure and strategic approach, engaging with the main thematic categories differently and assigning varied roles and meanings to each—first, the role of stakeholders and collaborations. In SC Trikala, partners and collaborators are managed primarily as a component of the Municipality's growth and capitalisation strategy. In contrast, the overall SC strategy is the product of extensive consultation with external actors and collaborators (i.e. Bloomberg Associates, Athens Digital Council). These external contributions are central to design and implementation in the case of Athens, and their involvement is highlighted throughout the official documentation. In the case of Heraklion, the strategic plan relies on partnerships and collaborations, but the strategy exclusively engages local and regional agents.

Another key difference is the understanding of capitalisation and branding. In the case of Trikala, the formal policy documentation details the Development Company's growth trajectory through its participation in SC initiatives and implementation of European-funded projects. Similarly, Heraklion's strategic plan includes a dedicated section on branding, introducing three 'development identities'—'Resilient City', 'A City with a Strong Cultural and Touristic Identity', and 'Truly Smart City' (Municipality of Heraklion 2016: 48). In contrast, the strategy observed in the Municipality of Athens focuses on re-branding the city as an 'all-year destination' (Municipality of Athens 2018: 18) via the establishment of a dedicated desk, namely the Athens Development and Destination Management Agency, with little reference to prior SC experience.

The strategies also differ in understanding the urgency of social acceptance and position the concept differently in their agendas. For Trikala, minimising adverse reactions within local communities is prominent, as evidenced by forming a predominantly municipally owned company and initial smart tools designed for specific demographic groups of the regional population. Heraklion's plan reflects substantial local stakeholder engagement and prior experience in digitising services. Athens' strategy—criticised by senior officials—appears less resident-centric, prioritising external corporate collaboration over addressing local needs (Participant 05 2023)

At the same time, all cases share the same foundational premise; Athens, Trikala, and Heraklion joined the smart turn just before the advent of the new millennium and later intensified their digital endeavours following the 2008 crisis to kickstart their recovery strategies. However, the findings reveal that these city administrations adopted distinct agendas and vested different

meanings to cultural heritage in terms of (a) what is understood as a cultural heritage asset locally and (b) the role of the discourse in the digital transformation of each city. In each case, cultural heritage was understood uniquely, with its perceived usefulness and potential varying significantly within the strategic frameworks employed by each administration. From a policy perspective, there are three findings to consider and reflect 'from' (Massey 2007: 10) when generalising 'wider problematics' (Georgiou 2024: 19).

First, one of the most intriguing observations from the researcher-analyst perspective is the contrasting interpretations of cultural heritage that emerge within the same national context. This differentiation is significantly pronounced when comparing the policy implementations in the Municipality of Trikala with those in the Municipality of Heraklion, suggesting that local contexts shape divergent understandings of cultural heritage and what ultimately qualifies as a cultural heritage asset. In SC Trikala, for example, the city adopts a broad interpretation of local cultural heritage, encompassing not only traditional and folk music (i.e the world-renowned genre of rebetiko [3] and the legacy of Vasilis Tsitsanis [4] but also local myths of elves and fairies. By contrast, Heraklion's cultural activities are predominantly centred on classical and archaeological dimensions, such as the heritage of the Cretan Renaissance and the works of Dominikos Theotokopoulos [5]. It is noteworthy that, despite being deeply woven into everyday Cretan life through traditions, folk songs, social practices, and agricultural celebrations, intangible expressions of local cultural heritage have been mainly overlooked - or fail to meet the formal inclusion criteria of official policy - highlighting the absence of accordance with regards to coherently articulating the cultural heritage discourse at the national level.

Second, the findings also hint at an institutional aspect regarding the limitations and constraints in elevating cultural heritage assets through SC tools and designing comprehensive cultural heritage strategies within the context of digital transformation. In all three cases examined, most cultural heritage-related projects were either not part of the official SC policy agenda or emerged as a byproduct of broader priorities such as education, engagement, or tourism. In the cases examined, the majority of cultural heritage projects were either not formally integrated into the official SC policy framework or emerged incidentally as a secondary effect of broader priorities, suggesting the lack of sufficient incentives to grant cultural heritage an integrated role in the broader context of digital transformation.

Third, the case of the Municipality of Athens provides insight into the implications of involving external actors in existing cultural ecosystems while shedding light on the disproportionate engagement and decision-making power granted to private and local stakeholders in policy-relevant discussions and processes. Fieldwork and text analysis revealed that a single donor is responsible for financing all cultural and heritage-related initiatives within the SC Athens official agenda. This occurs despite the participation of various stakeholders—from private actors and NGOs to technology giants such as IBM—in both the design and implementation phases of the strategy. While, at face value, the city administration's reliance on one funder might appear inconsequential, it raises significant questions regarding how specific dimensions of cultural heritage are being authorised by a solitary private actor acting as the principal benefactor. The extent of decision-making power vested in this stakeholder and the limitations or vetoes they may impose in the planning and executing cultural initiatives hints at another concern often met in the SC discourse internationally. It is essential to consider how this stakeholder's authority has influenced a policy area that has long been historically under-prioritised in terms of funding and resources and ultimately, study the extent of their control over the policy-making aspects of bringing together the overall agenda. Across all three agendas analysed, the cultural heritage component consistently receives less funding than other sectors, such as sustainability, transport, or resource management. This pronounced funding disparity effectively confers disproportionate decision-making power on any actor capable of securing the limited resources available.

Another sociological aspect worth discussing emerges when considering the ultimate objectives of the examined policies. Many second-generation smart city projects - namely smart city 2.0 - emphasise the 'rehumanisation' of policy discourse, contending that technology serves primarily as a means to improve people's lives rather than as an end in itself. Frequently, technology is portrayed as a transitional medium that facilitates greater transparency, enhanced connectivity, and the pursuit of sustainable futures—even advancing democratic ideals (Collier 2019; Big Data for Humans 2017; Mayor of London 2017). Indeed, recent developments suggest that the smart city narrative has expanded, or perhaps deepened, in its engagement with humanist ideals. In this spirit, contemporary policies have increasingly incorporated rhetorics related to feminism, sustainability, and antiracism, as reflected in numerous campaigns disseminating 'humane technological futures' (Georgiou 2024: 43).

However, it is difficult to engage with narratives as such without reflecting on the complex relationship between systemic oppression and mainstreaming discourses that, under different

circumstances, might serve as vehicles for questioning and resistance - such as culture and heritage. Often co-opted to reinforce established cultural norms (Williams 1958), the much-contested concept of popular humanism has been researched through several lenses and at different times (Manne 2016; Browne 2006). In the case of Greece, media production, particularly film production during the 1960s and 1970s, depicts rather accurately how mainstreaming narratives that could be perceived as radical or critical were repurposed to reinforce prevailing cultural norms. Particularly during the Greek military junta (1967–1974), film productions in Greece exemplified a deliberate effort to construct and disseminate an idealised version of national identity that emphasised tradition, conservatism, and social conformity. The popular cinema of that era advanced narrowly defined gender roles and even normalised practices such as domestic violence while actively silencing dissent and opposition to the regime. The junta's ideological framework for modern Greek identity was grounded in idolising famous actors and cultural icons and strategically popularising the status quo. By redirecting public attention toward a glorified portrayal of Greek society and celebrating homogenised national and cultural symbols, the regime consolidated its control over cultural production and legitimised nationalistic, socially conservative, and gender-conforming discourses within Greek society.

Along the same lines, the deliberate selection of a single, dominant private actor to finance Athens' official cultural heritage strategy raises serious questions about the criteria and circumstances that led to its selection over other potential stakeholders. This decision calls into question this actor's understanding of the discourse and its capacity and willingness to safeguard the intricate mosaic of diverse, often conflicting, heritage elements instead of advancing norms that primarily serve its own profitability and business interests. Drawing on previous research in the familiar socio-economic context of Southern Europe (Wolff 2018), there is clear evidence of an uneven dynamic between prominent, large-scale institutions active in the cultural heritage sector and independent, small- and medium-scale organisations. The latter frequently struggle to secure funding due to their markedly different operational approaches and, more often than not, their limited ability to demonstrate comparable managerial and operational capacities. Consequently, in the absence of a common framework and the necessary guarantees between funders and applicants, the funding landscape appears to favour those bidders whose practices are most compatible with the funders' priorities.

Can a renewed understanding of cultural heritage underpin more equitable revenue-sharing models? Can it support different forms of tourism and contribute to historical repair and

recognition processes? Can it be integrated into broader policy responses to climate change through adaptation or mitigation? Can it enhance transnational understanding and, in doing so, ultimately protect human heritage? These questions have been raised by social sciences and humanities scholars for many years—if not decades—while others, though more recent, are increasingly gaining attention. Despite appearing as distinct issues, the underlying connections between these discussions are seldom acknowledged explicitly. These seemingly separate debates could be linked by exploring a framework that could envision the progress of the cultural heritage discourse within a broader sociopolitical, economic, and environmental ecosystem.

Conclusions

In the initial phases of research, I sought to bring together an overview of the current understanding of the cultural heritage discourse under the light of urban 'smartness' and specifically within the implemented SC agendas. I aimed to outline its progress while critically engaging with the central debates shaping its discourse. In the process, I encountered a growing body of research that stresses the urgency to address the non-human turn [Grusin 2015] and to explore whether digital transitions might offer new insights into reconciling the long-standing debates embedded in the cultural heritage discipline. While attempting to ground some of these ideas by theorising how smart technological tools have altered our relationship with cultural heritage and, therefore, the meanings we vest to it in contemporary policymaking. Preliminary research findings suggest that Greece remains in the early stages of developing a coherent, organised policy framework for urban 'smartness'; however, for the past two decades, consecutive milestones have been met and have significantly altered the way the Greek State understands the potential of the said transformation when it comes to urban sustainability and development.

The digital transformation in Greece has proceeded in a non-linear fashion, rendering the precise identification of the digital turn's onset rather challenging. Nevertheless, the initial efforts to modernise public sector operations were set in motion circa 2000, initiating a period characterised by intensified endeavours to incorporate ICT into public services and formalise e-governance on a national scale. Over the decade, Greece continued to invest in digital infrastructure and expand the suite of services and SC tools until the 2010s, when the transition acceleration matured and became gradually available to the broader public. When comparing

the cases studied, it becomes evident that critical components—such as a consensus about articulating cultural heritage among policy-relevant stakeholders along with adequate incentives for city officials to invest in the strand—are still lacking. Nonetheless, since then, Greece has funnelled substantial European Union funding through initiatives such as Horizon 2020 and the European Regional Development Fund ('Εταιρικό Σύμφωνο Περιφερειακής Ανάπτυξης' [ΕΣΠΑ]) into SC projects. These investments aim to enhance ICT infrastructure and advance sustainable development strategies, many of which incorporate local heritage assets and cultural elements as part of their SC agendas.

This research does not claim that the future of cultural heritage is confined solely to its capacity to remain anchored in specific geographical locations or to be viewed exclusively through a local lens. On the contrary, it appears that our understanding of cultural heritage is profoundly influenced by globalisation and digitalisation, given that individuals are increasingly exposed to cultural heritage expressions mediated through digital means. Observations from this study indicate that the digital, global mediation of cultural heritage may, in fact, reorient attention toward the necessity for site-specific, small-scale solutions. More importantly, these findings prompt us to re-examine contemporary cultural heritage practices as a means to expand our comprehension of the discourse and potentially contribute to the preservation of our human legacy—encompassing traditions, expressions, artefacts, knowledge, inventions, and practices. In a world where human touch and intrinsic understanding of entire disciplines are being substituted by automation, one might ask whether a new framework of understanding cultural heritage can serve as the anchor of what makes us human. This inquiry is not only timely but also essential, as it challenges us to consider the multifaceted impacts of digital transformation on the cultural sector and to reassess the role of heritage in safekeeping both local identity and specificity while theorising its global relevance.

It is worth considering that in international SC literature, beyond the primary actors and stakeholders who, being in positions of authority, drive and determine the course of this transformation, the city itself is also often regarded as the principal agent of change. As a response, numerous scholars have emphasised the urgent need to recentre humanness, especially amid the rise and subsequent decline of the SC discipline (Jacobs et al. 2022). As technological advancements and digital interactions become increasingly dominant, a pressing question arises: Can cultural heritage protect the intrinsic qualities that make us human? This concern has grown notably in an era when the very same digital tools intended to democratise access and enhance people-centric services are also implicated in mediating, and at times

exacerbating, forms of racial, gender, and transphobic violence through surveillance, control, and data protection mechanisms (Georgiou 2024: 3). The dual nature of these technologies—capable of liberating access while simultaneously reinforcing inequalities—illustrates one of the many contradictions embedded in the urban 'smartness' discourse.

This paper contends, acknowledging the various asymmetries and conflicting narratives, that a deeper understanding of how concepts integral to our humanness—such as creativity, inspiration, tradition, and identity—are conceptualised and transmitted within the context of smart policy-making necessitates an examination of how digitisation is interwoven with the formation of urban structures (ibid: 3). Urban infrastructures have proven notably fragile during periods of financial, epidemiological, and ecological crises, exerting profound effects on global order over recent decades. Yet, these same urban structures also encapsulate some key paradoxes of technologically advanced cities. For instance, while gentrification can displace residents from historic neighbourhoods, these areas are simultaneously celebrated on social media for their authenticity and aesthetic appeal. Moreover, surveillance algorithms overwhelm us with traffic data yet may restrict access to essential services, such as healthcare and education, for specific demographic groups through practices akin to predictive policing (ibid: 4). Ironically, as human control diminishes, human agency becomes indispensable.

Therefore, in a context where urban 'smartness'—particularly the SC model disseminated by major technological entities—has faced harsh criticism for constructing human realities in ways that consolidate decision-making power among 'those in charge' (ibid: 77), recent research strands engage with alternative framework, such as Braidotti's posthumanism (Fernández-Götz et al. 2021) offering avenues to reconceptualise heritage as a phenomenon that transcends traditional anthropocentric limitations. In this moment of reflection for the discourse, rethinking heritage in terms of 'responsible inheritance' (Sterling & Harrison 2023: 1) could encourage a more inclusive understanding that recognises the interconnectedness and co-existence of human and non-human actors within the same ecosystems. Ultimately, these insights demonstrate that local specificities are intertwined with broader global debates within the cultural heritage discourse. As digital transformation reshapes the ways we interpret and engage with heritage, the 'glocal' increasingly serves not only as a geographical reference but as a critical medium for analysis. This metamodernist perspective on digital mediation invites further inquiry into whether such transformations will forge new connections and strengthen global cultural heritage or reinforce existing inequities and undermine the qualities that make us human.

Another reason to assume that the discourse will continue to grow in importance and, therefore, should be approached through relevant, adequate terms for its analysis is the integral role that cultural heritage and relevant policies play during times of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, exposed the fragility of the cultural sector and the precarious livelihoods of creative workers. The cultural industry was hit particularly hard, resulting in millions of artists, administrators, and creative professionals being among the most affected. At the same time, however, this extraordinary crisis brought into sharp focus the remarkable capacity of art and culture to transform lives and spaces, both in the physical realm and across digital platforms (World Cities Culture Forum 2022). Impromptu balcony choirs, collective painting projects, and musicians entertaining neighbours during lockdowns, alongside the surge in digitally created and freely streamed cultural content, exemplify the metamodernist tension between 'hope and melancholy, naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality' (Vermeulen & Van den Akker 2010: 6).

During the pandemic, the coordination among institutions, organisations, collectives, and regulatory bodies emerged as an unexpected yet promising development. Recognising that the crisis affected communities unevenly, policymakers and stakeholders came together in unconventional formations, driven by a commitment to provide practical support to the most affected. COVID-19 management accelerated the formulation of new cultural policies—policies that would typically require years of deliberation—pushing public administrations in cities to 'explore collaborative funding models and fast-track public real improvements [..] from alfresco dining to asphalt art' (World Cities Culture Forum 2022: 6). In this environment, the urgent need to respond to the unfolding crisis led to the rapid launch and revision of policies within the cultural sector, prompting a critical re-assessment of established operational practices.

Amidst the pervasive uncertainty and grief, the scope for experimentation and iterative action expanded, affording policymakers 'greater freedom to develop ideas and take action at speed' (ibid: 9). The World Cities Culture Forum Report (2022) offers incisive insights into how cultural policy assumed an expanded role during pandemic management, particularly in navigating a range of emergent challenges. Drawing on these findings, the research should further investigate the role and positioning of cultural strategies during the pandemic, arguing for the growing importance of cultural heritage in urban resilience and recovery strategies. Two primary objectives should drive the research. First, it should examine the scope of identified cultural policies and interpretively analyse their specific goals and expected outcomes—

focusing on the circumstances under which these policies were devised and by whom. Second, it should aim to identify and analyse the intentions of policy-relevant stakeholders to uncover the underlying priorities and considerations that have shaped the design and implementation of cultural policy responses to COVID-19 on a national scale. In line with the principles of IPA, the research should primarily focus on identifying meanings, patterns, and varied approaches across different geographic and socio-political contexts, aiming to provide a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted role of contemporary cultural heritage practices relative to other urgent priorities.

Notes

[1] The NRRP (‘National Resilience and Recovery Plan-Greece 2.0’) was officially launched in 2021 as a strategic move to revitalise several pillars of the post-COVID Greek economy. In May 2021, the plan was approved by the European Commission, setting milestones such as digital transformation projects and green initiatives. Greece 2.0, supported by NextGenerationEU funding, sought to elevate public services and ensure grant absorption in several nationwide beneficiaries and local governance bodies.

[2] (1) Meeting the NRRP's criteria to uphold the quality and financial prerequisites [(as outlined by the Plan (Hellenic Republic 2022)] (2) Achieving international recognition of best practices to secure robust materials and systematic data (3) Maintaining a sufficient corpus of published and publicly available resources to conduct the analysis.

[3] The Central Public Library of Veria is a key agent in the city’s digital transformation. Through a robust programme of educational and cultural activities organised by Veria Tech Lab, visitors have the opportunity to attend workshops on computing, coding, and 3D printing, utilise the Maker Space, borrow smart devices, and access a diverse array of books and services from both international and Greek research institutions. This institution plays a pivotal role in advancing the digital and cultural landscape of the region, currently serving over 50,000 citizens.

[4] Rebetiko is a genre of Greek folk music that emerged in the early 20th century following the influx and subsequent settlement of Greek-speaking refugees and migrants in several Greek cities after 192. As of 2017, rebetiko has been officially included in the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It is rooted in the cultural exchanges and stylistic

merges between Asia Minor and Greece. Rebetiko reflects the marginalised communities' lived experiences and struggles, including refugees, outlaws, and the working class. The genre gained popularity throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Over time, rebetiko has evolved to become known worldwide as a vital element of Greece's cultural heritage and national identity.

[5] Vassilis Tsitsanis is considered one of the most influential Greek songwriters and singers and is mainly responsible for popularising the 'rebetiko' genre in the late 1950s. Tsitsanis was born in the city of Trikala in 1915 and his contribution and legacy is still celebrated as a crucial part of the city's identity through the newly stablished 'Vasilis Tsitsanis Museum' and several music schools carrying his name along with other less-famous Trikaline musicians and composers.

[6] Doménikos Theotokópoulos (1541 – 1614), widely known as El Greco, was a Greek painter, sculptor, and architect of the Spanish Renaissance born in the Kingdom of Candia (now Heraklion, Crete). Titian and Tintoretto influenced his works, leading to the incorporation of various elements of Mannerism. His unconventional, dramatic, Vyzantine-like painting is widely considered a precursor to Expressionism and Cubism.

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