

Irish castles and ancient Greek rites show culture's role in regional regeneration

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Tapping into the long and rich histories of places around Europe is a central part of an EU push for rural and urban revival.

Finola Finlay claims to know almost every inch of West Cork in southwestern Ireland. That makes her acutely aware of climate change's threats to the cultural identity of the remote coastal region.

Finlay first got to know the area in her early 20s when she studied archaeology at University College Cork, or UCC. After four decades of working in higher education in Canada, she rekindled her connection to West Cork 12 years ago by choosing to retire there with her husband.

On the rocks

Dozens of castles that dot the West Cork coastline are not just remnants of the ancient Irish clans that once held sway over the territory but also living links to the ancestral roots of today's inhabitants, according to Finlay.

"The locals are very proud of their [heritage](#)," she said. "They are very proud of their castles. They love them."

Rising sea levels and coastal erosion resulting from climate change pose risks to that heritage. Preserving it was a prime focus of a recent EU-funded research project called [CHICC](#), which wrapped up in September 2023 after almost three years.

Heritage is also a central part of the New European Bauhaus initiative to improve everyday living in Europe by bridging the worlds of science, technology, arts and culture. The EU is organizing an [NEB festival](#) in the Belgian capital Brussels on 9–13 April.

Castle views

Finlay lives near Rossbrin Castle, a historical landmark in a state of ruin

after a series of severe storms in the 20th century. What remains of the castle dates from the 15th or 16th century.

Many such structures are teetering on the brink of destruction or have already vanished without leaving a trace, according to Finlay.

"Every time there's a big storm, we wake up in the morning and wonder if Rossbrin Castle is still going to be there," she said.

Across the water from her home, on Cape Clear Island, stands a 16th-century stone castle that is also exposed to harsh Atlantic storms.

Called Dún an Óir, the castle served as a [case study](#) under CHICC to assess the interplay among heritage, climate change and [local communities](#). As a result of the rising sea, the castle can no longer be reached on foot and is marooned.

Residents contributed paintings, poems, children's drawings and personal stories linked to the castle. The works often referenced the weather and the changing climate.

Some pictures and poems depicted violent storms and collapsing landscapes.

A man who participated recounted how, decades ago, he reached the castle on foot during low tide on a calm winter day.

"We were learning together about the relationship between heritage and climate in this very unrestricted and non-expert-driven way," said Dr. Sarah Kerr, an archaeology lecturer at UCC who led CHICC.

Climate conscious

The researchers also examined damaged heritage sites in Jutland, Denmark and in the Fife area of Scotland in the UK. Like Dún an Óir, both are sparsely populated.

CHICC adopted a "citizen-science" approach in each case by involving community members as researchers.

While Kerr decided on the research objectives, local residents collected data about the sites and chose what to do with the information.

Approximately 50 to 70 people participated online during COVID-19 lockdowns in each location, according to Kerr.

CHICC led to a significant boost in climate literacy among the Irish, Danish and Scottish participants, according to Kerr.

She said that about 70% of them reported a better understanding of climate change as a result of their active involvement in the project.

While helping to keep cultural heritage alive, CHICC also made participants more aware of its potential loss—as exemplified by Dún an Óir in Ireland.

"By looking at the history and how the castle changed over the course of 500 years, we were learning how the life of the castle started," said Kerr. "And if it has a beginning, it may have an end."

She said the greater appreciation that CHICC's participants gained about the impacts of [climate change](#) helped to lay the ground for possible further environmental action by them.

In that context, the project served as a stepping stone to longer-term local engagement, according to Kerr.

Old foundations, new layers

Local residents are also at the center of another EU-funded project seeking to bridge the past and future in three European locations.

But in this case the focus is urban areas and the role of cultural heritage in their regeneration.

Called [HERITACT](#), the project began in March 2023 and is scheduled to run through February 2026.

In addition to a town called Ballina in Ireland and Italy's second-largest city, Milan, the focal points include the Greek municipality of Elefsina.

A seaside industrial center outside Athens, Elefsina is also the birthplace of ancient tragedian Aeschylus and home to one of the most important religious sites of antiquity—a sanctuary where pilgrims were initiated annually into the Eleusinian Mysteries for the cult of Demeter and Persephone.

In Elefsina, whose population is around 30,000, the HERITACT researchers are involving six neighborhoods in cultural and sustainable urban initiatives.

Active engagement

While still in its initial phase, HERITACT has already attracted hundreds of local participants including students and children, according to Dr. Stylianos Karatzas, the project coordinator and a civil engineering fellow at the University of Cambridge in the UK.

"This is something that we did not expect at this point of the project,"

said Karatzas. "This shows that people actually need these types of innovative solutions."

The project has created plant-covered walls and shading systems for public spaces. It has used a design technique—tensegrity—that balances pushing and pulling forces to produce strong and flexible structures.

The installations are not just for looks; they're designed to be low-maintenance and to showcase sustainable urban development.

The project will also use urban mobile furniture, which can be rearranged and adjusted as users see fit. The aim is to make heritage spaces capable of hosting various activities such as food markets, sporting events and theater performances.

HERITACT will extend this approach to some of Elfesina's industrial heritage spots including an old soap factory, the city's first such site founded in 1875, and to the Eleusis cinema, built in the first half of the 20th century and recently reopened after closure in 1988.

In Milan, the project plans to strengthen cultural and [social activities](#) in ancient farmhouses, called "cascine," through additions such as local vegetable gardens and green tensegrity installations.

In Ballina, HERITACT is repurposing historical buildings like the Convent of the Immaculate Conception, focusing on their potential for preserving Ireland's social, cultural and artistic heritage.

Back in West Cork, Finlay has shown the power of local heritage through a [blog](#) that she has written with her husband, who died last month.

The blog, which has delved into the region's history, landscape and

culture, has amassed more than 2 million views in the past year.

More information:

- [CHICC](#)
- [HERITACT](#)

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