



# The UNESCO Serial Property of Arab-Norman Palermo. An Assessment from a Sustainable Development Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

### The UNESCO Serial Property of Arab-Norman Palermo. An Assessment from a Sustainable Development Perspective

This article analysed the socio-economic and environmental impact of the UNESCO World Heritage serial property of the "Arab-Norman Palermo and the Cathedral Churches of Cefalù and Monreale" on the city of Palermo in the four years following the recognition of its Outstanding Universal Value by UNESCO and the site's inclusion on the World Heritage List in 2015. The UNESCO brand has an extraordinary appeal for travellers and, conversely, this opportunity can turn a city with thousands of years of history into a mass tourism destination. Scant attention has given to the environmental quality of the tourism it attracts, although it may foster growth in the local economy in the short term, and in the medium to long term overtourism may undermine local cultural and social traditions and push the city to the limits of its carrying capacity.

The aim of this study is to evaluate the first results of the effects produced by UNESCO recognition, from the perspective of sustainability through the monitoring carried out by the site management body, the forecasts set out in the Management Plan and the environmental indicators within the city of Palermo.

The analysis aims to highlight that the current tourism model, implemented by local policies and stakeholders, risks turning the city into a mass tourism destination, jeopardising its environmental carrying capacity and having negative effects on sociocultural traditions as well as deteriorating the quality of life and well-being of residents.

In conclusion, it showed that implementing appropriate sustainable tourism strategies in which local governance plays a key role can make it possible to pursue the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN 2030 Agenda.

Adopting measures and planning initiatives based on foresight and constant implementation of local tourism and sustainable land development policies can help avoid the risk that inclusion in the World Heritage List may turn from an extraordinary opportunity to foster and protect the local cultural heritage into a threat to the city of Palermo.

## KEYWORDS

UNESCO cultural heritage, Enhancement and management of cultural heritage, Local sustainability, Tourist carry capability, Arab-norman Palermo.

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## **The UNESCO Serial Property of Arab-Norman Palermo. An Assessment from a Sustainable Development Perspective<sup>2</sup>**

Since the earliest times, Sicily has been a land subject to various dominations due to its geographic location right in the heart of the Mediterranean sea and its significant natural resources. Sicily features about 20 percent of the world's biodiversity and all these riches have been contended by the countless peoples who have inhabited Sicily and left their vestiges in its cities, along its shores and in its valleys. Palermo is a multifaceted and diverse city that is a living narration, through its monuments, churches and urban fabric, of the life and history of the ancient city, as well as of the ethical and cultural values on which it was founded, and which are still preserved among the pieces of its mosaics.

The serial property "Arab-Norman Palermo and the Cathedral Churches of Cefalù and Monreale", included in the UNESCO World Heritage List (WHL) in 2015 for its Outstanding Universal Value, is an expression of a unique style of cultural heritage and is representative of tangible and intangible aspects that embody extraordinary beauty and precious values. The monuments, built by the finest masters during the period of Norman rule between 1071 and 1194, are characterised by different styles and different elements that fit together to become one and are a priceless cultural testimony and an expression of peaceful coexistence among peoples. It is precisely the blending of tangible and intangible heritage, the expression of a profound sociocultural syncretism, that makes the UNESCO Arab-Norman heritage of Outstanding and Unique Universal Value (see, Piano di gestione, 2018).

«Two palaces, three churches, a Cathedral, and a bridge are in Palermo, the capital of the kingdom, and two Cathedrals are in the municipalities of Monreale and Cefalù [...] (They) are an outstanding example of a socio-cultural syncretism between Western, Islamic, and Byzantine cultures. This interchange gave rise to an architectural and artistic expression based on novel concepts of space, structure, and decoration that spread widely throughout the Mediterranean region» (Nomination dossier, 2018, p. 206). The name of the UNESCO serial property refers to the pairing and entwining of Arab and Norman culture and art, that is, the multiple styles that permeate the buildings and give «a conscious and unique combination of elements derived from the architectural and artistic techniques of Byzantine, Islamic and Western Traditions. This new style contributed to the developments in the architecture of the Tyrrhenian side of southern Italy and spread widely throughout the medieval Mediterranean region». (Nomination dossier, 2018, p.168).

Sicily, and the City of Palermo in particular, became the crossroads of flourishing cultural, artistic and architectural activity under Arab domination: the Normans then commissioned the best Byzantine and Islamic master craftsmen to build the city's iconic landmarks. The result of this cultural mixture constitutes the richness of the texture of colours, materials, and styles as well as the elements that each culture brought to the monumental models in question. The blending of different styles of artistic magnificence is mirrored in the dimension of sociocultural syncretism in the city of Palermo, which is still cherished and handed down in the soul of Palermo's civilization also through its vocation as a welcoming and hospitable city to others, a city in which the culture of tolerance and integration among peoples persists as a cultural, artistic, historical and social identity.

Today, the city of Palermo bears witnesses and fosters coexistence between local citizens and citizens of different origin, culture and religion, and citizens experience this diversity as an element of richness and social redemption, constantly nurtured in all its forms. The efforts made by civil society and local politicians led in 2015 to the Palermo Charter-International Human Mobility,

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which was approved by the municipal council of Palermo. The chart aimed to be a starting point of a cultural and political process to recognize human mobility in the international law. The Chart of Palermo aimed to cross the permit-of-stay system thanks to a new law about citizenship. In 2018, Palermo also hosted the Palermo Conference on Libya, a conference organised by then Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte before UN and EU institutions and U.S. representatives in order to guide the stabilisation process in Libya, building a possible road to peace. The choice fell on Palermo as the venue for the conference for its symbolic value: a Mediterranean city on the border between Europe and Africa, in addition to being a city with deep cultural and historical values and a vocation as an open and cosmopolitan city.

The worldwide recognition of the Outstanding Universal Value of the serial property “Arab-Norman Palermo and the Cathedral Churches of Cefalù and Monreale” by UNESCO has profoundly affected the sustainable and durable development of the cities concerned and the effects of nomination as a UNESCO World Heritage List has inevitably spilled over into the local area in economic, sociocultural and environmental terms. This study assessed the economic, social and environmental impact that inclusion in the WHL has had in the four years since nomination — from 2016 to 2019 — on the city of Palermo, which comprises seven of the site’s nine monuments. The analysis of tourist flows was used to assess the trends in tourism economy following UNESCO nomination, while the sociocultural impact on the area was studied by evaluating the effects of the increase in the number of travellers on the resident population. Third, the effects of the anthropogenic load on the environment was examined, considering in particular some environmental indicators, in order to establish a relationship between tourist concentration and resident population and determine whether the increase in tourist flows was matched by a higher quality of life of resident citizens and whether tourism development as pursued by local stakeholders was in line with the UN 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development. The latter aspect was particularly important, as the risks associated with excessive pressure due to *overtourism* are not to be underestimated.

**UNESCO’s prestigious recognition of the serial property is a multiplication factor for tourism.** The UNESCO brand is a “magnet for visitors” in that it is globally identifiable and recognisable, evidence of a place’s distinctive identity and unique characteristics that are a guarantee of a tourist destination’s quality through recognition of its Outstanding Universal Value. The UNESCO brand is recognised by 90 percent of travellers although at times they are not fully aware of the meaning of this prestigious recognition. Only 55 percent of travellers knows that UNESCO, in addition to protecting the existing tangible heritage, is also committed to foster the intangible heritage, that is, those precious traditions handed down over time through many artistic forms.

The designation of a UNESCO property, being a UN organisation, contributes per se to the sustainability of an area; however, despite this, the commitment to achieve the SDGs as part of UNESCO recognition is at times underestimated by visitors. Only 36 percent of visitors is aware that UNESCO designation contributes to sustainable development (see Conti *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, a study by the Libera Università di Lingue e Comunicazione IULM in Milan on UNESCO’s image showed that 98 percent of the sample surveyed has basic knowledge of UNESCO’s role and have a confidence rate of 75 percent, while the percentage of those who know UNESCO more deeply has a more specific role, such as promoting sustainable development and protecting biodiversity, drops to 39 percent. (ABIS, 2011). After all, implementing sustainability strategies through tourism is an ambitious goal and not without obstacles as it requires a strong commitment on the part of local authorities, the resident population and even the tourists who visit a place.

With regard to Italy, the intangible heritage recognised by UNESCO comprises fifteen elements, including, for example, the Mediterranean diet, which became part of the WHL in 2013 following joint candidacy by a number of countries in the Mediterranean basin, including Italy, Spain, Greece, Morocco, Cyprus, Croatia and Portugal.

UNESCO’s Intangible Heritage of Humanity aims to protect and pass on oral traditions and expressions, arts, social customs, practices and knowledge in order to contribute to «preserving

cultural diversity in the face of globalisation and social transformation processes» (UNESCO, 2003) especially with a view to making young citizens aware of the bond between human beings through intercultural understanding and dialogue, encouraging mutual respect for different ways of life and peace. Intangible heritage retains specific characteristics within the tourism sector, in that it plays a crucial role in choosing one tourist destination over another: intangible heritage deeply affects the experiential dimension of tourists and may, moreover, contribute to an eventual return trip to the same site, whereby a traveller's very experience may be a factor in reinvigorating the tourism sector over a longer time span. Thanks to its thousands of years of history, Palermo is rich in intangible cultural assets and that intangible heritage preserves the identity and uniqueness of this city. Today, however, this wealth appears to be jeopardised by certain factors.

In 2015, the introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN 2030 Agenda marked a change in the international political agenda and resulted in a potential paradigm shift toward a more sustainable world. Sustainable development, as outlined in the report "Our Common Future"<sup>3</sup>, is the strategy for environmental protection and fair and equitable access to resources globally; this development model is only feasible by holding the three dimensions of sustainability together: economic, environmental and social (see Angelini & Giurrandino, 2019). Tourism, which is a prime economic factor for the world economy, falls under at least three different SDGs, impacting aspects concerning the promotion of employment, culture and the local area.

The 2017 Berlin Declaration, undersigned by ten different countries, also aims to promote a different idea of tourism that can contribute to achieve the SDGs in order to build a fairer world, able to take into account not only the economy, but also the social actors in the environmental context, as the Berlin Declaration states. Similarly, the Declaration recognizes as mandatory the transformation of the current consumption model, which conflicts with Sustainable Development, by promoting, as the Conference named, "Transformative Tourism." «Only tourism that contributes to the improvement of the well-being of local people, the dignity of workers, the integrity of the environment, as well as the elimination of exploitation, inequality and poverty is a meaningful option for Sustainable Development» (Berlin Declaration, 2017). The central idea of the Berlin Declaration is transformative tourism as a community-building and environmental well-being element. According with this point of view, tourism is understood as a cross-cutting dimension of an area's sustainable development and, at the same time represents a critique of the current Western model of development and consumption.

Determining the direct effects of inclusion in the WHL on the local community of Palermo, also considering the tangible and intangible heritage that the city represents, is a complex task. It is necessary to consider not only the economic impacts on the local area, typical of Western mainstream culture related to growth and development, but also the contextual impacts in sociocultural and environmental terms in order to better fitting the implementation of a strategy of sustainable and durable development in the city of Palermo.

From an economic perspective, the direct impact of tourism on local economy can be measured separating tourism industry sectors such as restaurants, hotel chains, and local trade. A recent Regional Department of Heritage and UNESCO Sicily Heritage Foundation report about the accessibility of the assets that make up the Arab-Norman serial property, shows that thanks to UNESCO nomination, the number of monuments users recognised for their Outstanding Universal Value had a significant increase. After the initial attendance spike in 2015, the year of inclusion in the WHL, for example, the number of tickets to the Zisa Palace doubled from the previous year, from 40,000 to 80,000. The figures for the Palatine Chapel and the Royal Palace also follow an upward trend: the 400,000 tickets in 2014, were doubled in 2019. Similarly, the other UNESCO property experienced a sharp increase in visitors in the years following the nomination.

3 The report "Our Common Future" was drafted by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by G. H. Brundtland in 1987. The report set out the principles of sustainable development.

The positive trend in tourist fruition is not a phenomenon limited to cultural heritage, but also spills over to local economies. There are indeed numerous benefits that cultural heritage produces in its territories by driving the tourist economy that acts as a monetary multiplier (see Angelini & Giurrandino, 2019, *op. cit.*). According to the data provided by ISTAT on tourist accommodations, the capacity of non-hotel facilities in the four years that were taken into account remained unchanged in the years after 2015, while the capacity of non-hotel facilities such as B&Bs and "entrepreneurial rental accommodation" saw a gradual increase from 8,000 beds in 2015 to 130,000 in 2019. The B&B category appears to be the favourite choice of tourists and, in particular, foreign travellers as it better meets the needs of tourists of our time. Compared to classic hotel accommodations, B&Bs allow for a better quality experience and promote a sense of well-being as they offer personalised experiences, such as in the choice to serve a breakfast with typical and traditional local products, whilst the experience offered by anonymous places, such as hotels, offer large number of users a standardised and abstract hospitality. Compared to hotels, B&Bs fit better into a sustainability vision, as they help generate widespread benefits in the local area by fostering the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises. In this sense, the UNESCO nomination of the Arab-norman serial property has resulted not only in an increased tourist presence throughout the city, but also in the creation of new businesses that contribute to the city's sustainable development by generating new economies (see Angelini, 2021).

The UNESCO brand also contributes to the growth of tourism in the territory, but the extent of its impact is a highly debatable matter since defining exactly what the direct and indirect economic and social effects are on the territory is a complex task. It is estimated that the WHL nomination has only a partial effect on the trend of tourism flows and only in a tiny percentage ranging from +2% to +4%. This is because the most significant impacts on the territory will occur over the medium and long term. Data from the monitoring of Palermo's tourist flows in the pre and post-UNESCO nomination period show that after 2015, although there is evidence of strong growth, these do not follow a linear trend but rather fluctuate. Such irregular tendency is the result of many factors: marketing policies that are able to attract tourists from a certain geographic area rather than another, socio-political factors that can affect, for example, the seasonal adjustment of tourism, increase in the average length of stay of tourists, as well as in the choice to diversify the offerings for users. The UNESCO brand has the power to significantly attract international tourists, rather than domestic tourists. In fact, at the national level, the UNESCO nomination will merely attract "niche" tourism, that is quality tourism rather than indiscriminately attracting visitors (Moreschini *et al.*, 2016).

There is also a number of secondary factors that affect the tourists flow toward a UNESCO property, such as the properties' management in the medium and long term; local and national territorial policies related to the provision of services; the quality of mobility within and in connection with the city, as well as properly functioning infrastructure such as roads, ports and airports, and the enhancement of recognition through marketing tools at national and international levels.

Considering the above, within an integrated and complex view, the assessment of the economic effects resulting from UNESCO nomination is far greater than the range of 2% to 4%.

In the impact assessment, it is also necessary to take into account all aspects related to the social context: the players interacting within the tourism industry, the expansion of the job market produced by the growth of the tourism and related sectors, as well as the evaluation of the effects on territorial and local well-being. Third, it is necessary to assess those effects of tourism growth that spill over to the city in urban and environmental terms.

The social transformations that have occurred over the past two centuries globally have seen a rapid growth in the international tourism industry and globalisation has bridged great physical distances with the help of means of communication and transportation such as airplanes, trains and ships, which appear to be getting faster and cheaper. This has allowed the number of tourism service users to grow, transforming tourism from an elitist and niche activity into a popular phenomenon. The moment a place becomes popular, through an emulative process,

congestion sets in and conflict over natural and cultural resources ensues. Mass tourism, typical of the consumer society and the consumerist model, is that type of tourism which, because of the excessive anthropogenic load on the surrounding environment, exerts great pressure on host environments and societies. Mass tourism is therefore the exact opposite of sustainable tourism, that is, the tourism pursued by those who are eager to preserve humanity's tangible and intangible heritage for future generations and who wish to build a fairer and more equitable world. The serial property "Arab-Norman Palermo and the Cathedral Churches of Cefalù and Monreale" must therefore be framed, analysed and assessed within a sustainability perspective, that is, within the idea of not «compromising the right of future generations to enjoy the cultural heritage in equal measure and under equal conditions (Angelini & Giurrandino, 2019, p. 61, *op. cit.*) The implementation of sustainability is a controversial issue because of its complexity: neoliberalism and hypercapitalism continue to advocate linear economic growth as the only viable model within the current global context. Conversely, economic growth and related consumption is correlated with growth in consumption of natural, environmental, social and cultural resources. The correlation between economic growth and the deterioration of local territorial contexts is typical of *consumer societies* and affects every aspect of the daily lives of individuals and businesses.

The tourism industry in the global context plays a primary role. According to data provided by the World Travel & Tourism Council in 2019, tourism accounted for 10.3 percent of global GDP, i.e., \$9.6 trillion. Contextually, tourism impacts cities in sociocultural and environmental aspects. While businesses in the tourism industry internationally, as well as locally, continue to pursue the model of economic rationality, contributing to the quantitative growth of the domestic economy, everything related to sustainability in socio-environmental terms delays implementation because the economy and the environment continue to be two areas pitted one against the other due to the prevalence of the model of the standard economy over nature, the environment and society. «The capitalist economic model, in its narrowness, does not consider the economic value of natural resources, such as the health of ecosystems or biodiversity, or the economic value of social resources such as the quality of justice, the good relations between the members of a society, the degree of equality, and the democratic character of institutions» (Angelini *et al.*, 2015). The road to sustainability appears to be long and winding, and only recently has it seen the introduction of national political strategies that see the circular economy and green transition as an opportunity for innovation that would allow the economy to be reconciled with the environment (and consequently with society) in a perspective of each being functional to the other to allow the "carrying capacity"<sup>4</sup> to be observed as well as energy and food independence. The transition to a sustainable society requires a profound overhaul of the relationship between humans and nature, rethinking lifestyles and thus all the "logistical" aspects of daily life and holidays (see Angelini & Pizzuto, 2021).

Mass tourism, which embodies the holiday-making face of consumer society and a hyper-productive model aimed at hyper-consumerism, through the aid of homologation and capitalist standardization contributes to the deterioration of local cultural heritage. Modern culture, subservient to the economic model of global consumption, is itself consumed by tourists through a process of cultural loss or destruction in which the model of economic rationality leads consumers to choose standardised products, consequently eliminating any peculiarity, authenticity, and diversity, i.e., local crafts, foods typical of a place or a city, which are bound to make way for what modern consumer and tourist demands. Local traditions and social expressions are, instead, part of the intangible heritage of local culture, but where they are not protected or are distorted to please the tourist, they become part of a process of cultural obsolescence. The willingness on the part of local politicians to pursue incontrovertible economic growth by indiscriminately accommodating the culture of globalised consumer goods in their own cities and, in particular, brands

4 Carrying capacity refers to the Biosphere's capacity to sustain life on the Earth. According to Ecology, carrying capacity refers to the number of people in a population who are able to sustain their resources.

such as McDonalds, Burger King, Zara, and H&M make it possible to witness the hoarding of the city through depersonalisation and homogenisation. Local manufacturing, artisanal, culinary and cultural traditions will inevitably be eclipsed by the pressing demands exerted by the mass tourism market.

The historic centre of Palermo, following UNESCO nomination, introduced pedestrianisation as a safeguard by «establishing a perimeter around monumental complexes and their appurtenances identified as areas subject to protection constraints as cultural heritage» (Piano di gestione, 2018, p. 27, *op. cit.*) transforming the main streets into places of consumption, with a high concentration of businesses related mostly to the food and beverage sector, clothing, and footwear as a response to consumer society and mass tourism (see Cusimano, 2019). This category of tourism differs from cultural and hedonistic tourism, the kind of tourism that aims to give a unique, authentic and individual experience, an experience that is better combined with the Sustainability Paradigm. On the contrary, mass tourists consume the place they visit, following an already established model, a standardised model that sees tourists behaving in the same way: traveling by the same means of transportation, dressing in a certain way, eating the same way, seeing the same landscapes, and visiting the same attractions. This type of tourism creates narrow circuits in which the economic benefits produced by tourism are concentrated only in the hands of tourism majors at the expense of small businesses and the community, which instead suffer the effects and “costs” of tourism. This touristic development model is asynchronous to the current time. Indeed, the current ecological and identical crises require a switch in the natural and urban resources used as better protection.

For example, Palermo is a city within the cruise tourism circuit, an industry that generates 4 billion euros annually and allows 1,700,000 passengers to travel. However, this tourism model impacts the affected cities more in environmental terms than in economic and employment terms, since cruise ships, once they reach the port, release waste, air and sea pollution to the city. This impacts the citizens’ quality of life, which also assists in reducing urban space due to the increased tourist presence. The pressure of over-tourism has resulted in less clean and more polluted cities, where citizens’ quality of life is reduced. On the other hand, at the Berlin Conference, there was highlighted to shape urban policy toward Sustainability to ensure environmental pressures; this means also comprised those generated by over-tourism to requalify urban contexts and improve citizen’s life.

If one considers cruise tourism in the city of Venice, there is also the issue of landscape disfigurement and the alteration of the ecological balances typical of the Lagoon. This type of tourism is a manifestation of mass tourism as it brings same-day visitors without bringing at the same time the tourism and economic benefits to the city. In 2011, Engelbert Ruoss, head of UNESCO’s branch office in Venice, expressed his concerns about the state of health of the city of Venice for having reached its tourist carrying capacity causing irreversible damage to the city. Ruoss himself suggested specific sustainable development strategies for the protection of cities recognised as World Heritage properties by balancing the huge tourist flows, also resulting from cruise ships, in order to protect cities in the World Heritage List (see Tattara, 2013).

Overtourism, a phenomenon that is occurring also because of cruise tourism, contributes to the process of stripping away local cultures and traditions as well as to the impoverishment of the social and cultural identity of the city of Palermo, all of which contrasts with the idea of sustainable tourism advocated for the city of Palermo at the time of its UNESCO nomination at the session of the World Heritage Committee, which met in Bonn in 2015.

The exponential increase in the presence of tourists and an urban management that is not based on strategies aimed at absorbing the impact of tourism through appropriate policies, produces a cultural impoverishment of the city of Palermo, as a natural consequence of the dual process of globalisation and the failures of local policies aimed at the protection of the local cultural, traditional and artistic heritage as well as the poor enhancement of the intangible heritage that has characterised the city. To guarantee the conservation and fruition of the environmental and cul-

tural sites inscribed in the WHL, UNESCO requires a specific management plan shaped to protect and ensure Sustainability, in the long term, of the development of the extended area where the site is. Local policies adopted by the government appear to be mostly anachronistic, inadequate, and inefficient. The lack of compliance actions planned in the management plan, which would have better managed the development of the area by avoiding the overload of the carrying capacity during summer months, would have also implemented touristic promotion policies by encouraging tourism in different seasons. This strategy would prevent the overload of the carrying capacity in the city but also would originate, Thank the activation of a more efficient and efficacy touristic system, a more solid economic model, in other words, the implementation of Sustainable Development.

The lack of administrative and regulatory constraints, of adequate land use planning, and of consistent public and social policies in line with the sustainability paradigm, understood in its complexity, appears to be an obstacle to achieving the goals of sustainable development and also risks turning the opportunity arising from inclusion in the WHL into a potential threat to the city. This occurs because UNESCO properties are able to attract, as we have seen, a greater number of visitors than other potentially competing cultural and architectural assets that, though not belonging to the WHL, are relevant assets located in areas adjacent to UNESCO assets. Having to choose a destination for a vacation in a city where there are UNESCO properties, as in the case of the city of Palermo, tourists tend to visit first the assets that are part of the WHL, because as explained above, the UNESCO brand is identified as a "seal of quality" that confers a good reputation, and only secondly will the tourist visit other assets of cultural interest. In this sense, the 'primacy' of UNESCO assets makes them top-ranking attractors compared to other tourist destinations in the same city that experience a decline in attendance. This way, the establishment of the UNESCO property generates punctual tourist pressure on certain areas of the city through redistribution and for concentration. The five UNESCO monuments located in the historic centre of the city of Palermo, such as the Royal Palace and Palatina Chapel, the Cathedral, the Church of San Giovanni degli Eremiti, the Church of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio and the Church of San Cataldo have contributed to extending the length of stay of tourists in the historic centre as well as to increasing the concentration of tourists in the city centre. According to data provided by the Statistical Directory of the City of Palermo, the average stay in the city in 2016 was 2.1 days, while in 2019 it increased to 2.2 days. Prior to WHL nomination, tourists would spread across the broad area of the city instead of concentrating in the UNESCO brand places. Consequently, anthropogenic concentration within the urban centre has increased consistently, as have urban pressure factors. This modifies the previous urban and citizen equilibrium.

For an analysis as accurate as possible, it was necessary to limit the analysis of the data to the tourism-related businesses in the city of Palermo over the period covering the four years following official inclusion in the World Heritage List (WHL), i.e., 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019, as the years 2020 and 2021 were affected by the Covid-19 health emergency and consequently by the related lockdown that did not allow full fruition of either the city or its services, as well as hitting, inter alia, the tourism sector. Consequently, the data collected in the period after 2019 would not be representative of the ordinary trend of tourist flows in the city. According to ISTAT data, reprocessed by UNESCO Sicily Heritage Foundation, managing body of the serial property "Arab-Norman Palermo and the Cathedral Churches of Cefalù and Monreale" UNESCO, Palermo recorded, after an initial peak in 2015, a slight decline in 2016, while the following years recorded a gradual increase in tourist presences from both Italy and abroad, rising from one million presences in 2015 to 1.2 million presences in 2019; in particular, the percentage of foreign presence in the city increased by +13% in just four years (see Angelini, 2021, *op. cit.*)

While tourist presence contributes to the local economy, it also generates pressure on the territory. The tourism pressure index, which determines the capacity of an area to bear the anthropogenic load by measuring both the presence of tourists and the population within individual municipal boundaries, suggests that at times when there are greater tourist flows, the infra-



structure and services are overloaded and consequently there is overcrowding and disservices to all city users with sometimes irreversible consequences. Indeed, the concentration of tourism contributes to increasing pressure within the city and amplifying urban issues. The sudden development of the tourism industry in the city of Palermo in recent years has consistently impacted the city's carrying capacity in terms of tourism pressure, laying bare its pre-existing issues: the increased load of municipal solid waste, sewage disposal, increased traffic and related air pollution.

Air quality data for the city of Palermo, for example, show a deterioration of air quality over the four-year period. In August 2016, PM10 reached an average of 15.3 ( $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ ), not exceeding the daily allowable limit for human health, while in August 2019, this limit was exceeded eight times, testifying to the deterioration of air quality. Land consumption has also seen a sharp increase: while in 2016 the percentage of land consumed within the city of Palermo stood at 39.3 percent, with a density of 2.5  $\text{Km}^2$ , over the following four years this percentage rose to 39.5 percent, recording a land consumption density in the area of 6.8  $\text{Km}^2$ . Similarly, waste production, as shown in the ISPRA report data, confirms an increase in production from 597,216.7 tons in 2016 to 603,248.7 in 2019. If the current trend of tourist expansion continues to rise, there is a risk of transforming Palermo into another Venice, in other words, in a city where the accessibility to the historical center should be limited to the number of visitors to remain within the carrying capacity system and not to damage the quality life of residents.

The lack of readiness in managing flows by tourism operators produces overcrowding within accommodation facilities, resulting in damage to the quality of services offered, compromising the quality of satisfaction perceived by tourists and thus damaging tourism in the medium to long term. A second set of problems, related to the management of hospitality in Palermo, is determined by the seasonal nature of tourism, which begins in May and lasts until October, so the utilisation rate of hotel and non-hotel facilities is reduced to 30 percent, causing substantial economic loss during periods of non-utilisation (see Angelini, 2021, *op. cit.*). Conversely, the month of August recorded the peak of presences and degenerative phenomena due to the systems reaching the carrying capacity to support life<sup>5</sup>.

The concept of carrying capacity is linked to the need to stay within the ecological limits of a given area as well as within the economic and social limits. It is possible to apply the concept of carrying capacity theorized by Rees and Wackernagel (1994) to tourism in that, just as in nature resources are limited and therefore their use should be rationalised, even in cities, and particularly those recognised for their Outstanding Universal Value by UNESCO, are exposed to deterioration and require greater efforts in terms of conservation and protection, since where cities are not adequately monitored they risk being overwhelmed by tourist pressure, deteriorating the quality of life of resident citizens and their well-being, as well as that of tourists.

In conclusion, the UNESCO nomination of "Arab-Norman Palermo and the Cathedral Churches of Cefalù and Monreale" represents an extraordinary opportunity in terms of sustainable development, for its inhabitants and for tourists who will visit this Universal Heritage of Outstanding Value. Conversely, the UNESCO nomination requires a constant commitment on the part of local governance, economic and social partners and all stakeholders so that tourism development policies and not only are implemented from a sustainability perspective, that is, in the promotion of quality tourism, in which resident citizens can also benefit from the positive effects of tourism, not only in economic terms or the creation of jobs but also by following a model that pursues a process for the promotion and safeguard of the city, while continuing to identify themselves with their own territory through social ties and local identities. This would offer a better quality of life, such as a re-organization of urban viability or liveability or by providing urban decorum in the city.

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5 According to the World Tourism Organization's definition, "tourist carrying capacity" is the maximum number of people who can visit a tourist destination without damaging the physical, economic, and sociocultural environment and without causing a deterioration in the satisfaction that the visitors themselves can derive from it.

In this sense, the political strategies put in place in the city of Palermo appear to be inadequate and anachronistic and at times even in opposition to the UN 2030 Agenda. The lack of adequate and timely sustainable planning for the city throughout political tools such as municipal deliberation or political acts, as well as proper management of tourist flows poses a potential threat to the future of the city and its artistic, cultural, social and environmental assets; WHL membership, if not wisely managed and monitored, can overwhelm the city and its integrity, as is happening in other Italian cities that are UNESCO World Heritage property.

The Management Plan of the serial property "Arab-Norman Palermo and the Cathedral Churches of Cefalù and Monreale" can be the political and social compass for the implementation of sustainable development in the city of Palermo. Starting from monitoring and a SWOT analysis, it will be possible to implement and adjust socio-political strategies to improve weak points, as well as prevent looming threats in order to field appropriate and long-term policies.

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