

FORTRESS OF CULTURE ŠIBENIK:

From cultural heritage management to
sustainable social development



CASE STUDY

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*This project has received funding from the
European Union's Horizon 2020 research and
innovation programme under grant
agreement No 870691*

Fortress of Culture Šibenik: From cultural heritage management to sustainable social development

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January 2023

Abstract

This case study presents the development of cultural policies aimed at sustainable social development in the Croatian coastal city of Šibenik, which has experienced a transition from a socialist industrial centre to a de-industrialised city whose economy is oriented primarily towards tourism. However, unlike other major cities in the Adriatic area, Šibenik has used some of its historic resources to develop cultural programming aimed at sustainable social development. The city is surrounded by a network of large Renaissance fortresses that were sitting largely unused during the city's economic depression at the outset of the post-socialist period. An ambitious project to revive them (with an emphasis on cultural development) was put in place in the early 2010s. Between 2014 and 2020, 16.6 million euros were invested in three major fortresses (with a strong EU participation of 8.1 million euros), turning one of them into a concert venue and another one into an educational campus. In 2016, the city of Šibenik established a new public institution, named the Fortress of Culture, whose initial role was to manage cultural and economic activities in the newly revived fortresses. However, the relatively brief past six years of its existence have shown that, in addition to heritage management, the newly formed institution has also served as the central platform for further development and diversification of cultural activities in the city.

Keywords: cultural heritage, cultural management, sustainable social development

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Introduction: what, when, where, how, and why

What: This case study is centred around the revitalisation of medieval and renaissance fortresses in the Croatian coastal city of Šibenik. These fortresses have been turned into an important cultural resource for a city hard hit by economic transition, changing the narrative from a 'city in decay' to a location of wider cultural relevance.

When: Since 2011, fortresses in Šibenik have been a target of a comprehensive effort to employ culture as a means of wider societal change in the city.

Where: In Šibenik, a Croatian coastal city that underwent a significant socio-economic change since the war in the 1990s, losing several larger companies in the process and entering a prolonged period of stagnation, and then used cultural heritage as a means of revitalisation, largely funded by the European Union, creating a recognisable image and new touristic attractions in a new economic context largely oriented towards tourism.



Figure 1 - Location of the city of Šibenik on the Adriatic coast (Credit: GoogleMaps)

How: The case study is based on an analysis of policy documents and interviews with representatives of the city of Šibenik, the public institution Fortress of Culture, and a member of the civil sector in the city.

Why: The public institution Fortress of Culture is an example of using cultural heritage not only as a tourist attraction but as a platform for an inclusive and socially relevant culture. The city of Šibenik used a system of historic fortresses neglected for decades and turned them into cultural and educational venues, later branching out to other spaces within the city to create a programme not only during the tourist season and for a general audience but also for specific groups and featuring specific cultural contents. It is an example of how culture and well-conceived cultural policies, largely funded by the European Union, can have a significant influence on wider societal and economic contexts.

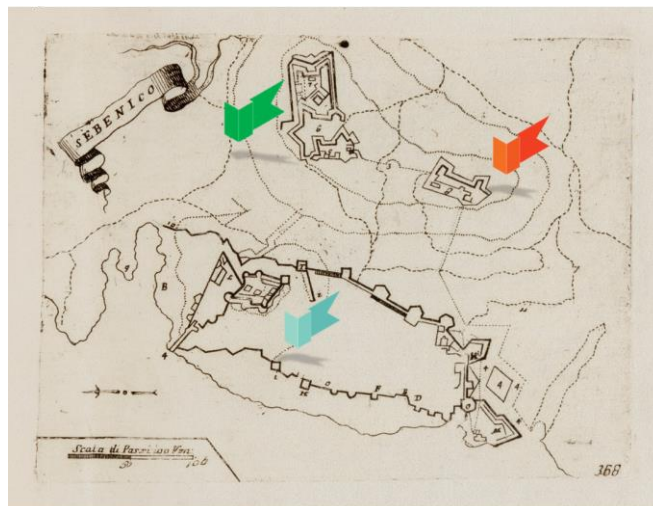
Methodology

The research for this case study combined two sources of information. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three interviewees chosen for their different institutional affiliations (or lack thereof). The first interviewee is a member of the city department responsible for economy, entrepreneurship, and development, heavily involved in the process of funding and conceptualising the Fortress of Culture project. The second interviewee is employed at the House of Arts Arsen, an extension of the Fortress of Culture project aimed at contemporary culture. Finally, our third interviewee is involved in several non-government organisations in the city of Šibenik focused on culture and youth.

In addition, an analysis of policy documents and city budgets was conducted with the primary goal of reconstructing the temporal dynamics and financial involvement of the city and the European Union.

Fortresses and their importance

One of the key characteristics of the city of Šibenik's urban configuration is a system of fortresses developed since the late Middle Ages, with four of them being of particular relevance in today's city.



- ➡ St. Michael's Fortress 2012-2014
- ➡ Barone Fortress 2014-2016
- ➡ St. John's Fortress 2016-2022
- Total worth: 9,59 mil. €

Figure 2 - Location of the Šibenik fortresses on a historical map, with years of revitalisation projects
(Credit: Fortress of Culture)

St. Michael's Fortress (*Tvrđava sv. Mihovila*) is situated on a hill overlooking the city. It was built in the 13th century and underwent significant expansions and modifications over the centuries. Today, it serves as a cultural and historical venue, hosting concerts, exhibitions, and various events. It can be seen as a symbol of the 'cultural turn' Šibenik has experienced in recent times, as it was the first one to be opened in 2014, and the events held there are the main cultural attractor, especially during the summer. Barone Fortress (*Tvrđava Barone*), situated adjacent to St. Michael's Fortress, was built in the 17th century. In recent years, it underwent extensive restoration and is now open to the public. St. John's Fortress (*Tvrđava sv. Ivana*) is the last and largest one to be renovated, serving as an educational campus with a dormitory and several conference rooms. Finally, St. Nicholas Fortress, constructed in the 16th century (*Tvrđava sv. Nikole*), is located at the entrance of the Šibenik Channel. Although it is not used for cultural and educational purposes due to its isolated and insular location, it is symbolically important because it was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2017 as the second such object in the city, after the Cathedral of St. James, which has been in the registry since 2001. This network of fortresses played a crucial role in Šibenik's effort to reinvent itself as a city of culture.



Figure 3 – A contemporary view of a part of the historic defence system of Šibenik (Credit: Fortress of Culture)

Historical, social, and economic context

For the majority of the twentieth century, Šibenik was an industrial town, profiting from a deep and well-protected harbor, good connections with the hinterland, a relative abundance of raw materials such as coal and bauxite mining in the vicinity, but also from the swift inclusion of modernised industrial infrastructure—the railway was built in 1877, and the nearby river Krka allowed one of the first hydroelectric power plants to be constructed already in 1895. All this contributed to large demographic growth, with the city reaching almost 40 thousand inhabitants in 1931, roughly the same size as today. This is a very rare occurrence in a country that was mainly urbanised after the Second World War, where dramatic increases in population were recorded. It is thus important to notice that Šibenik has had a stable urban population over a long period of time. This trend was continued in socialist times, with an emphasis on metallurgy and heavy industry. However, after the war in Croatia and the economic transition, almost all large factories were closed, bringing a prolonged period of economic and social stagnation. Another important spatial factor is the former presence of the Yugoslav army, which left the city with several large unused military complexes after it had left.

Today, the economy of Šibenik relies heavily on tourism, with constant growth and increased pressure on the urban space, particularly in the Old Town. Between 2009 and 2019, there was an 80% increase in arrivals, with 1.6 million overnight stays in the city, in addition to being a hub for surrounding attractions such as Krka National Park. In this sense, Šibenik is not different from other major cities in the Croatian Adriatic region of Dalmatia. Namely, they have also witnessed a large growth in tourist activities and in the economy in general, with a decrease in unemployment, stable economic growth, and a growing city budget.

In summary, the development possibilities of contemporary Šibenik have been determined by three important circumstances: the medieval city core with its' spatial limitations, an economic transition

that required a new direction, and a lot of unused space from industry and the military. All have been, in large part, used to advance the idea of culture as an actor in social and economic development.

City of festivals

An important part of the cultural development in Šibenik are its festivals, several of which have gained national and international prominence. The widely recognised International Children's Festival (*Međunarodni festival djeteta*) was founded in 1958, playing a significant role in audience development as it is oriented towards youth. It was one of the most important such events in former Yugoslavia, creating a recognisable and characteristic cultural fact. It emphasises the inclusion of different urban spaces by taking place in city squares and streets. The programme of this festival comprises theatre, puppetry, music, film, and the arts. It does not include only performances but also numerous workshops for children.

In recent times, the most famous representative was the Terraneo music festival, based on indie music but with established headliners, a cornerstone of the 'festival city' narrative that is an important part of Šibenik's cultural revival. Opening in 2011, it soon became an important cultural event but also a large tourist attraction; it is estimated that at its peak, 40 thousand people were present, roughly the same as the size of the city itself. For the majority of its' duration, it was taking place in a former military base, thus turning otherwise abandoned space of significant proportions into a cultural venue. The list of performers includes some very well-known and recognised names in popular music, such as National, La Roux, The Prodigy, Wu-Tang Clan, My Bloody Valentine, Gang of Four, Calexico, Azealia Banks, and many more. Apart from bringing many commercially successful acts, Terraneo also became a catalyst for re-thinking the city and its cultural context.



Figure 4 – A musical performance on Barone Fortress (Credit: Fortress of Culture)

This festival was closed after 2014 due to organisational difficulties, but it was succeeded by a smaller one, *SuperUho* (Super Ear), in 2015, which was also oriented towards bringing well-known alternative and indie performers. The second festival was a demonstration of things to come, as some of the events took place at the recently opened St. Michael's fortress, thus establishing it as a relevant, adequate, and sustainable venue. This festival became defunct after two years, but its importance lies in the structural logic that brought together the city of Šibenik and the cultural and human capital. Both festivals were organised by Šibenik-born managers and musicians established in Zagreb, the national capital. This process of brain circulation was key to understanding that Šibenik can become a relevant city for contemporary performers and that the infrastructure that was being developed for the sake of culture has the potential to be successful and sustainable.

Another important festival that currently takes place in the city is *FALIŠ – Festival alternative i ljevice Šibenik* (Festival of the Alternative and the Left Šibenik). This festival presents contemporary debates on the political left in the form of round tables, book presentations, theatre plays, exhibitions, and concerts. It is one of the most important such events in Croatia and the largest one outside of the capital. It successfully connects local activists with the national and regional cultural scene.

Furthermore, it is estimated that in recent years there have been up to 40 festivals a year taking place in Šibenik and its immediate surroundings, strengthening the 'city of festivals' moniker. Of particular importance, however, is the fact that the festival scene had two important effects on the city culture: it has demonstrated the importance of local cultural capital in shaping the cultural scene, and it has shown that spaces for culture in Šibenik are numerous and they can contribute to city development and urban renewal. Our interviewee from the civil sector points this out as an important factor: she attributes the capability to accept various festivals to the strength of civil society, as Šibenik has a high density of non-government organisations, much higher than the national average.

Fortress of Culture

Following the period after the Croatian War of Independence, fought from 1991 to 1995, Šibenik was dominantly considered to be a city in decline, mainly due to perceptions of industrial decay and a lack of mass tourism on the same level as other coastal Dalmatian cities of similar size, primarily Dubrovnik and Zadar. Although this notion can be countered with the fact that the Šibenik-Knin county had one of the highest GDP per capita growth rates in the country and that major economic indicators were above the country average, there was an apparent lack of recognisable symbolic points that could overturn this narrative.

In 2011, the city of Šibenik adopted a new developmental strategy¹ based on a number of 'turning points' with a rather inconspicuous set of goals in Chapter 3 ('Sustainable tourism') and Subchapter 8 ('Further development of the tourist offer with strong promotion in the global market'). These documents stated that there would be a summer stage built in St. Michael's fortress and that two further fortresses would be renewed and re-evaluated, while Barone's fortress would be remediated. The logic behind this initiative was based on a simple idea, namely that, although neglected for decades, the mentioned fortresses present a major potential in a city that was destined to use its existing space due to a lack of available area. According to the interviewee working for the city department responsible for the economy (Interviewee 1), this was a crucial moment for later cultural

¹ <https://www.sibenik.hr/upload/dokumenti/2011/Strategija%20razvoja%20Grada%20C5%A0ibenika%20-%20Razvojni%20projekti.pdf>

development, as it linked culture with a significant source of funding, creating a context in which a wider conceptual platform of fortresses as carriers of socially impactful culture could be conceived.



Figure 5 – Aerial view of the revitalised St. Michael's fortress (Credit: Fortress of Culture)

In June 2012, the European Regional Development Fund (called IPA IIIC-BRI) funded the project 'Revitalisation of St. Michael's Fortress' worth 1.7 million euros (including a million euros from EU funding) with the goal of turning the fortress into a summer stage with further educational contents and a sustainable platform, generating 'innovative cultural and artistic, educational, and other programmes'². In 2014, it opened with a modest amount of 12 different events, followed by 25 in 2015 (including the *SuperUho* festival with 26 different acts) and laying the foundation for the present, with more than 60 events in various venues in 2022. In addition, it was proclaimed the best tourist attraction in 2014 by the Croatian Tourist Board and received wide attention from the media, strengthening the image of a city that relies on cultural tourism. This was in concordance with another strategic document, 'Developing the City of Šibenik brand as a first-class destination for cultural tourism'³. This document tackled several weaknesses in the city's development potential, like undervalued cultural heritage, a lack of image as a cultural destination and a lack of strategy.

According to Interviewee 1, this was a kick-starter for a wider involvement with European Union funding programmes in general, as it was the first major project in a city that was lacking human capital and experience in applications and was at the same time in need of both investments and a strategic rethinking of cultural policies.

In June 2014, another European Regional Development Fund project was implemented with the goal of revitalising the Barone fortress. It included 'infrastructural works on the renovation of the fortress, equipment of the gastro-cultural centre, the children's playground, and the construction of an amphitheatre'⁴, together with a platform for augmented reality and a set of documentary interactive

² <https://www.tvrdjava-kulture.hr/en/st-michaels-fortress/revitalization-project/>

³ <https://www.tvrdjava-kulture.hr/media/27653/kulturnibrandgradaibenika.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.tvrdjava-kulture.hr/en/barone-fortress/revitalization-project/>

contents about the history of the fortress, the city, and the county. Opened in 2016, today it houses a summer cinema, different festivals and workshops, and a special section dedicated to local gastronomy.



Figure 6 – A view from the revitalised St. Michael's fortress (Credit: Fortress of Culture)

In June 2016, the process of integrating the fortresses into the cultural and social life of the city was further developed by establishing an institution dedicated to sustainable and inclusive management: the Fortress of Culture. Its stated activities are the following:

- Cultural heritage management based on contemporary and innovative approaches, including financial sustainability.
- Strengthening the perception of Šibenik's fortresses as a platform for the promotion of cultural and creative industries through the organisation of cultural events.
- Providing attractive cultural and entertainment contents - whether educational, musical or gastronomic programmes; film, dance or others.
- Cultural audience development and audience education.
- Active promotion and dissemination of interest in cultural and historical heritage, its contents and programmes in the public sphere.⁵

The Fortress of Culture was established and is owned by the city of Šibenik as a public institution, comprising ten departments. Although partially relying on EU funds and the city budget, the institution's budget in 2021 contained a substantial fraction of 43% from its own activities, mostly from tickets sold and renting the venue. At the moment, the institution is also co-coordinating seven EU-funded projects, ranging from further investments in infrastructure to ecological waste management to digitalisation.

⁵ [About us | Fortress of Culture Šibenik | Šibenik fortresses \(tvrđjava-kulture.hr\)](#)

The year 2016 also marked the beginning of the largest project up to date for the city of Šibenik – revitalising the St. John’s fortress, with 6.5 million euros from EU funds. In 2022 it was opened, serving as a campus with a dormitory, also under the umbrella organisation of the Fortress of Culture.



Figure 7 – St. John’s fortress’s educational campus in use (Credit: Fortress of Culture)

With those three projects the city has revitalised a space comprising around 25 thousand m², turning previously unused space into a coherent public platform for cultural development.

In addition, in 2017, Šibenik became a part of the ‘Venetian Works of Defence between the 16th and 17th Centuries: Stato da Terra – Western Stato da Mar’. This entity was enlisted as a UNESCO heritage site, and the formidable insular fortress of St. Nicholas, guarding the entrance to the Šibenik canal, was included. Unlike other Šibenik fortresses, St. Nicholas is situated on an island and not easily accessible. Although not a part of the city proper and therefore not usable in the same sense as the other three fortresses, St. Nicholas became a potent symbol of cultural heritage, making Šibenik the only city in Croatia with two UNESCO-listed sites (the other one being the Cathedral of St. James in the old city).

To conclude, in a period of eleven years, Šibenik transformed from a city with neglected heritage to a place with a coherent cultural policy based on heritage, putting an emphasis on social inclusion, audience development, and sustainability, largely based on EU funds. In fact, it can serve as an example of how culture managed to transform a city and strengthen its’ capacities not only culturally but also financially.



Figure 8 – State-of-the-art technology is used in the presentation of heritage (Credit: Fortress of Culture)

House of Arts Arsen and further efforts towards an inclusive culture

In 2019, adding to an already revitalised cultural infrastructure, the House of Arts Arsen opened as a venue dedicated to smaller cultural events. This cultural venue was named in the memory of Arsen Dedić (1938-2015), the well-known singer-songwriter and poet originating from Šibenik. Located in the very heart of the city, this space has been strategically chosen to serve as a multifunctional venue for activities ranging from arthouse cinema, theatre performances, and concerts, to various educational programmes. Its role is to revitalise public life and develop audiences for aspirational cultural content. Furthermore, it has an added focus on children and youth, with a series of matinees dedicated to such programmes.

The programme of the venue was conceptualised in coordination with various local institutions. Our interviewee employed at the House of Arts, Arsen (Interviewee 2), described this process in detail. According to him, when the new institution was founded, consultations were held with all relevant cultural institutions in the city, such as the Croatian National Theatre, the city library, the city museum, and elementary and high schools. The purpose of this was twofold: not to overlap with already existing cultural content and to better understand areas where development was needed.

The venue itself is a renovated cinema built at the end of the 1950s. This means that in this case, a remnant from the period of post-WW2 industrialisation, the already present but in the meantime decrepit socialist architecture, was revitalised and put to good use. Positioned very close to the city centre, it has been mentioned as a resource in various strategic documents since 2011. An emphasis was put on the cinematic programme because Šibenik did not have a working cinema between 2004 and 2010 (in the latter year, a commercial chain opened a cinema complex). This period without the city having a cinema was another symbolic element of the ‘city in decay’ narrative.

It is no wonder, then, that the importance of such a space was a key element in overturning the narrative. Symbolically, Šibenik is no longer a city without the cinema (which used to be a permanent point of mocking), but a culturally enriched place with different commercials, arthouses, and programmes dedicated to children. Content-wise, the House of Arts Arsen brings much more than that. Its programme comprises wide areas of culture available to citizens.



Figure 9 – The audience awaiting the start of one of the daily programmes in the House of Arts Arsen
(Credit: Fortress of Culture)

In the words of our interviewee from the civil sector (Interviewee 3), it is very uncommon for the representatives of a non-governmental organisation not to be critical towards institutions, but as an activist on youth and social justice issues, she is rather satisfied with the opportunities provided by the new cultural policy.

Institutionally, we can trace an important shift as well. House of Arts Arsen is managed by the Fortress of Culture, thus marking a change from using medieval and Renaissance heritage to promote culture (often with a heavy emphasis on tourist season) towards a comprehensive platform that at the same time revitalises more recent architectural resources and offers a year-long cultural programme with particular focus on certain groups of the population.

In addition, a Friends' Club was established by the Fortress of Culture, offering a yearly subscription with a wide range of benefits, such as free entrance to all fortresses, reduced prices for many events, and a discount for all programmes in the House of Arts Arsen. There is also a sub-project called 'Our heritage—our inspiration' (*Naša baština—naša inspiracija*), where members vote on small-scale renewal projects of medieval and Renaissance heritage.

Not everything is coming up roses – threats and opportunities

Facts gathered so far point to a remarkable change in policies and perceptions that helped Šibenik turn from a 'city in decline' to an internationally relevant cultural location, reviving heritage and creating a self-sustainable environment for a broad spectrum of cultural contents.

However, we should also mention some structural difficulties, mainly stemming from the limited capacity of a small city. Interviewee 2 was keen to point out that recent developments have outgrown the volume of local human capital. This can be illustrated by the fact that there are currently several potential job opportunities requiring highly skilled candidates with specific knowledge who are not available or interested in working in Šibenik. The potential candidates for these jobs work in competitive market environments and are reluctant to accept a position within a public institution with a cap on salaries. This is mainly relevant for the field of creative industries and for technical personnel.

Furthermore, interviewee 2 brought up another important point. It concerns the problem that an institution of the size of the Fortress of Culture tends to monopolise the local cultural scene. This is in contrast with earlier periods when civil society was fragmented but diverse. She considers diversity to be a strength and is engaged in several projects of non-governmental organisations that are trying to get funding from different sources, such as the Kultura Nova Foundation and the Clulture Association, as they provide an alternative to a saturated city budget. In addition, one should mention that there are places in the city not involved in the Fortress of Culture that offer relevant cultural programmes. Organisations such as the Azimut Club also organise concerts, book presentations, round tables, and similar events, and they are also an important part of city life. In other words, while recent developments in cultural policies are generally welcomed by the civil sector, there is also a wish to retain a certain level of independence from these developments.



Figure 9 – The Šibenik fortresses have become a popular gathering place for the citizens (Credit: Fortress of Culture)

Conclusion

The Fortress of Culture can be seen as an example of a successful use of culture in revitalisation of a city. It is also an example of a cultural policy model that managed to turn neglected heritage into a major resource not only for tourism but also for the local community. In these concluding remarks, we will briefly touch upon three important elements of the described process: funding provided by the European Union, heritage, and sustainability.

European Union funding: The city of Šibenik has used EU funds as a major source of income. This is not new or unusual for Croatian cities. What is specific, however, is that initial success in applying for EU funding was closely tied to culture and cultural heritage and that the experience gathered in the process was helpful in later applications for similar projects. Through the revitalisation projects, a coherent platform has been created as well as significant know-how that could be used in other development activities. This means that culture has gained structural significance in city finances.

Heritage: Turning three fortresses into cultural and educational venues after a prolonged period of neglect meant that the city has revitalised a significant resource: 25 thousand square meters of attractive space used not only as a tourist attraction but as a network of lively cultural places. In a purely architectonic sense, this was a vast project in which three large objects were reintegrated into city life after decades, even centuries, of being marginalised.

Sustainability: Taking a step further from heritage, Fortress of Culture has provided a platform for building a sustainable cultural context while also providing an economic impetus by creating new tourist attractions. Former fortifications, which were largely unused, have been turned into spaces of living culture used for both large concert attractions and a number of smaller projects. With almost half of the budget covered by ticket sales and the renting of different spaces within these locations, it is realistic to expect an ever-larger tendency towards financial self-sustainability. In addition, the Fortress of Culture has established another institution, the House of Arts Arsen, a multipurpose venue used for a number of different cultural events. Revitalising a former cinema from the socialist period, it has turned it into a platform offering a wide variety of programmes for different parts of the population, with a strong emphasis on children and youth. This certainly can be viewed as taking a decisive step towards long-term cultural sustainability and the development of urbanity.