



Voices from the Future – Ideas for today

The EMPATHS Manifesto



INTRODUCTION.

The Interpreter.

"I am a heritage interpreter from the future – a future you still have the power to shape. Recent history has been marked by conflicts, climate crises and divided communities – events that shook our society and revealed its vulnerabilities.

In the effort to rebuild, Participatory Heritage Interpretation became part of the way forward.

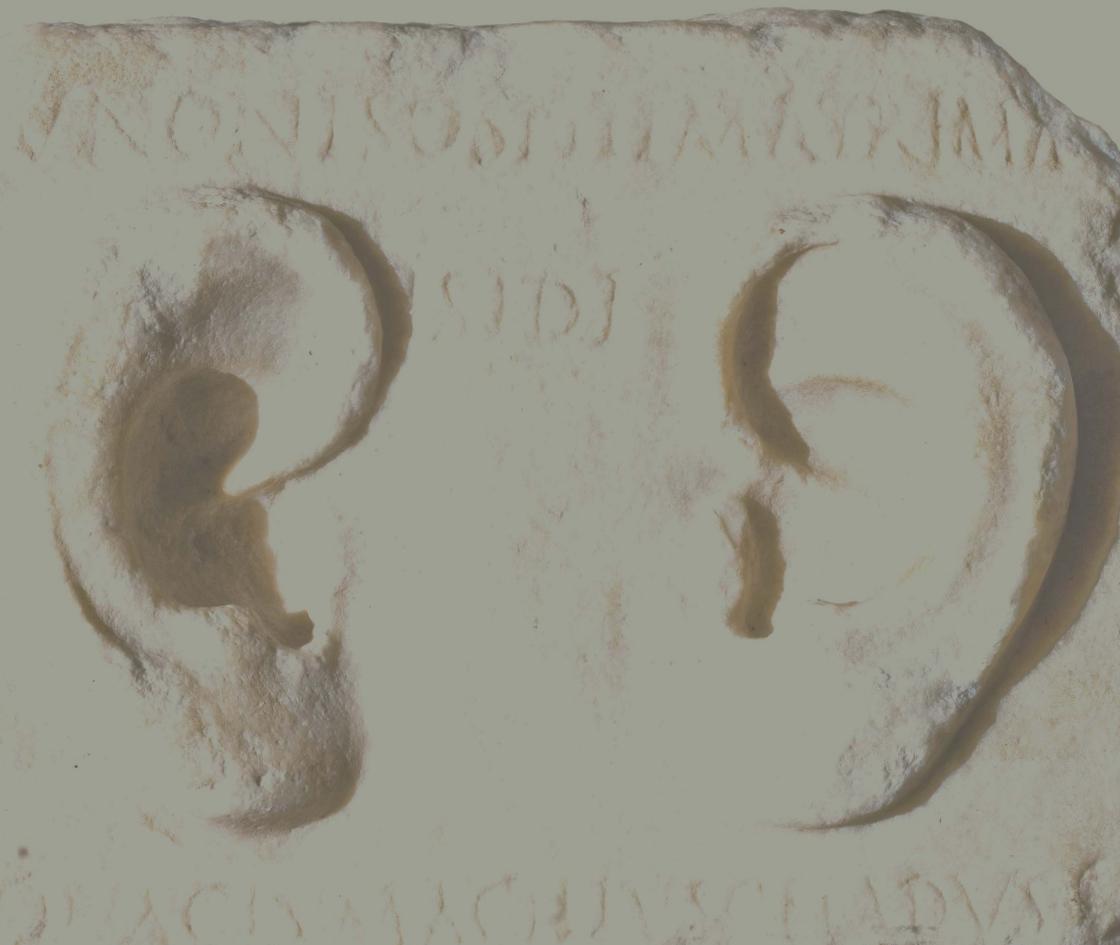
I used to think heritage interpretation was about telling stories.

Over time, I learned it was just as much about listening. Making space. Encouraging conversation. Heritage became less about explaining and more about connecting.

That shift changed everything: how we worked and what heritage could do in the world."

INTERPRETING HERITAGE

Heritage Interpretation helps people build meaningful connections with heritage. The EMPATHS project reimagines this practice: from top-down explanation to participatory dialogue. By doing so, it unlocks heritage's potential for democracy, inclusion, and social well-being.



Are we ready to listen?

From Rione Terra, Pozzuoli, this second-century AD marble slab shows two ears in relief. Its inscription names Juno Sospita, Magna Mater and Isis— it is a plea for the gods to listen.

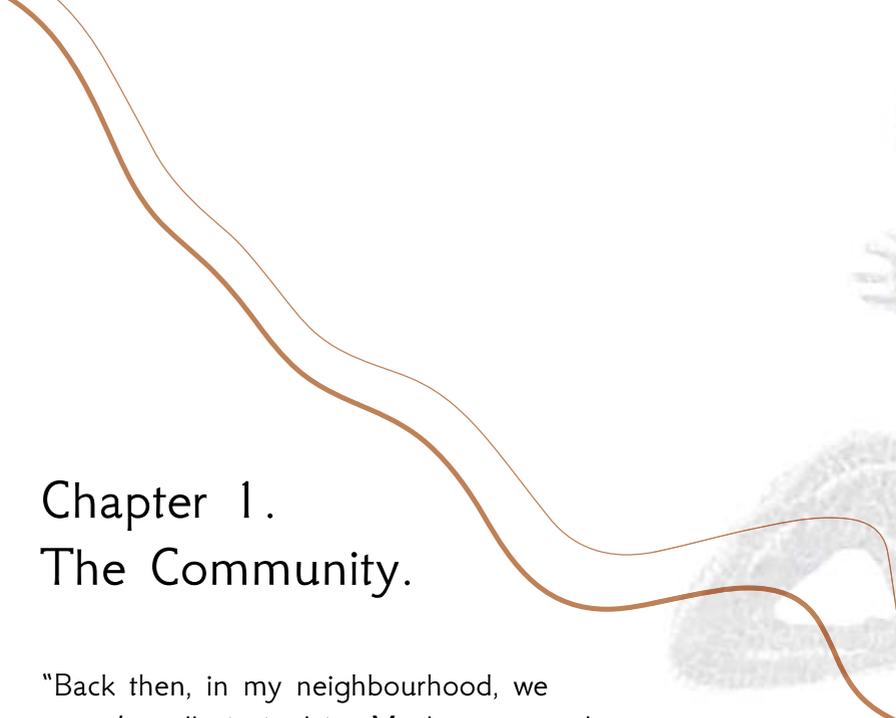
Those carved ears invite us too: if heritage is something we make together, it starts with listening — whose voices are still missing?



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Chapter 1. The Community.

“Back then, in my neighbourhood, we weren’t really invited in. Maybe to attend a tour, or check out an exhibition. But our voices? They weren’t in the picture. It just didn’t feel like heritage had anything to do with us. So, honestly, we stopped paying attention. I remember thinking, ‘It’s like we were welcome to visit, but not to have a say.’ Sure, looking back, it’s more complicated than that – but at the time, that’s how it felt.”

THE CHALLENGES WE TAKE ON

Top-down practices persist.

Many heritage institutions still rely on hierarchical approaches to heritage interpretation, where professional expertise guides the process but leaves limited space for community perspectives. Participation is often superficial – people are asked for input but given little real influence.

Communities feel disconnected.

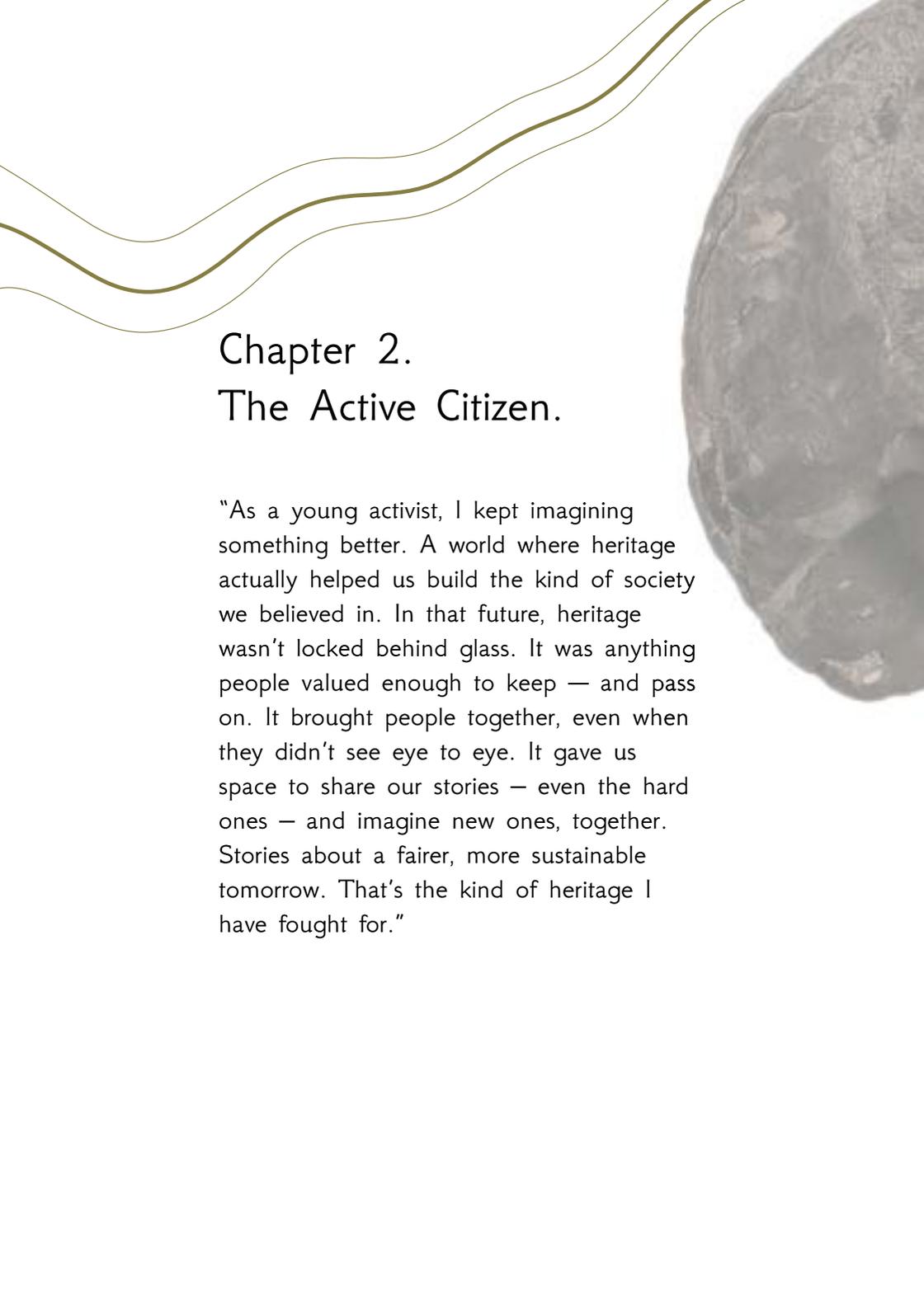
Many local residents – both long-standing and new – do not feel a sense of belonging to local heritage. Awareness of heritage's importance is often low, and its potential to contribute to community well-being and local development remains untapped.

Risks of division and resistance.

When communities feel excluded from shaping their heritage, conflicts can arise. Narrow and restrictive narratives can take hold, fuelling division instead of unity. This often leads to resistance, a lack of respect for rules, and even harmful behaviours.

Lack of skills and institutional support.

Despite good intentions, many professionals lack the time, training and institutional backing to take on participatory work. As roles become more procedural, some seek new ways to strengthen the sense of purpose and social impact that heritage work can offer.

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Chapter 2. The Active Citizen.

“As a young activist, I kept imagining something better. A world where heritage actually helped us build the kind of society we believed in. In that future, heritage wasn’t locked behind glass. It was anything people valued enough to keep — and pass on. It brought people together, even when they didn’t see eye to eye. It gave us space to share our stories — even the hard ones — and imagine new ones, together. Stories about a fairer, more sustainable tomorrow. That’s the kind of heritage I have fought for.”

OUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF HERITAGE INTERPRETATION

Communities as partners.

We dream of a world where communities are active partners in heritage interpretation – not just recipients of pre-packaged messages. When people take part in meaning-making, heritage becomes personal – and what matters to them, they help to protect.

Heritage as a bridge.

In this world, heritage serves to bridge social divides, foster belonging, and contribute to democratic and sustainable futures.

Professionals as facilitators.

We dream of a world where heritage professionals act as facilitators of dialogue and co-creation, helping to surface diverse voices and perspectives. They enrich their practice and find renewed energy.

Meaningful and empowering.

Interpretation will help communities explore both shared and contested histories, and empower them to imagine and shape better futures – with heritage as part of that story.

Reading the spiral of time

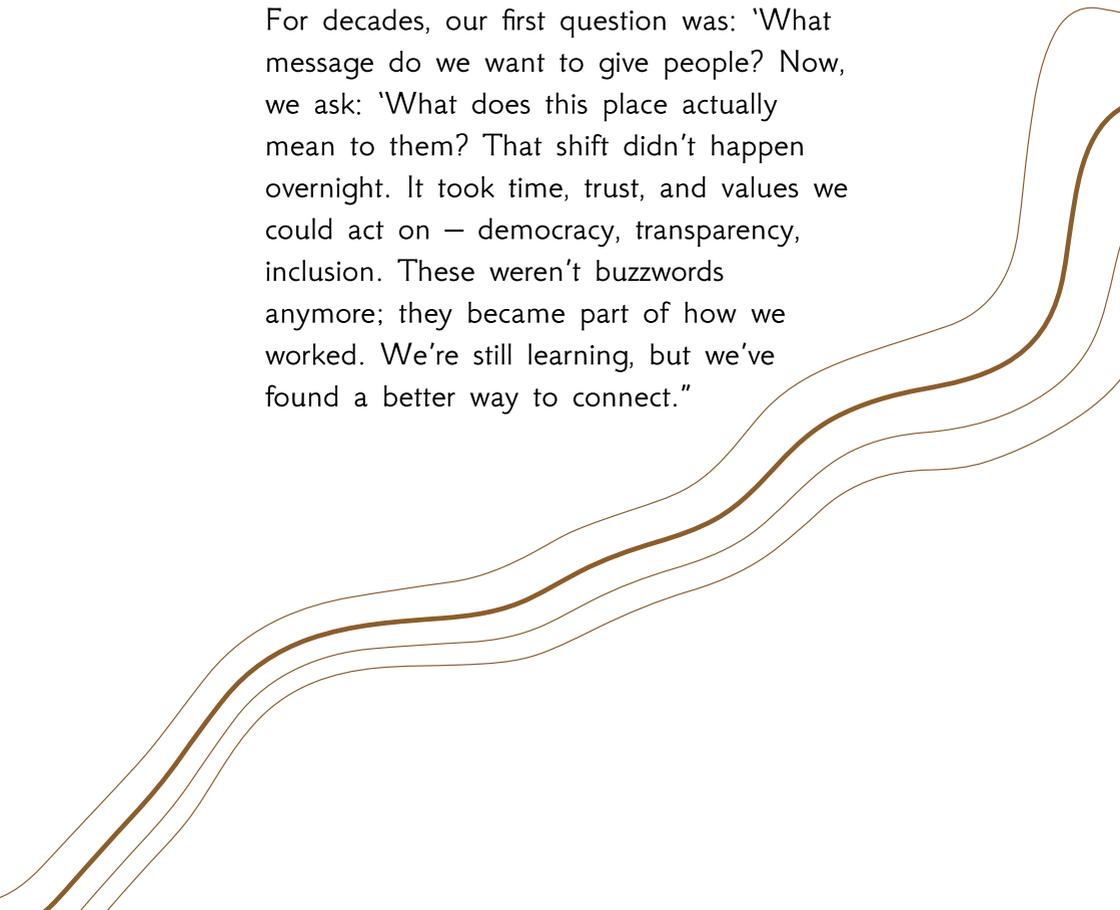
In the Karawanken–Karavanke UNESCO Global Geopark, the ammonite fossil records deep time in stone: proof that change is Earth's constant. As we shape tomorrow's landscape together, what will we protect, restore, or let change—and who gets to decide?



Chapter 3.

The Heritage Director.

“At the museum, we had to rethink a lot. For decades, our first question was: ‘What message do we want to give people? Now, we ask: ‘What does this place actually mean to them? That shift didn’t happen overnight. It took time, trust, and values we could act on – democracy, transparency, inclusion. These weren’t buzzwords anymore; they became part of how we worked. We’re still learning, but we’ve found a better way to connect.”

The bottom right corner of the page features a decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping, wavy lines in shades of brown and tan, creating a sense of movement and depth.

THE VALUES THAT GUIDE US

Democracy: respecting people's rights to shape their heritage.

Transparency and ethical responsibility: being clear, open, and accountable.

Diversity: embracing many voices, many stories.

Co-creation: working with, not just for, communities.

Inclusion: reaching out to all, especially the less heard.

Shared responsibility: giving people a real role in telling and preserving heritage.

Mutual respect and trust: building relationships across differences.

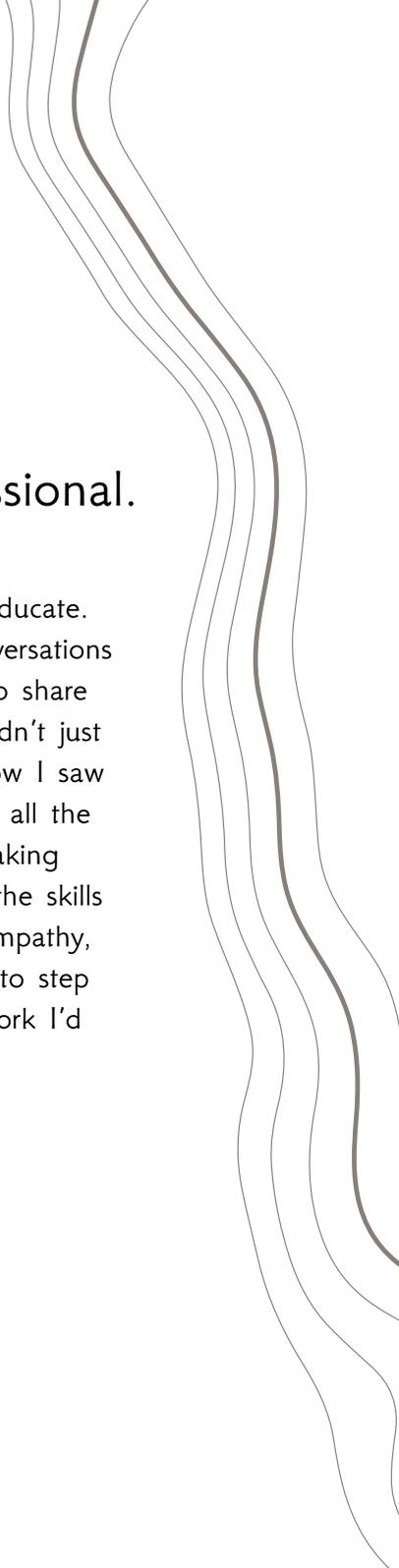
Long-term commitment: building lasting relationships beyond projects.

Grounded knowledge: rooting dialogue in research, evidence and reliable knowledge.

Chapter 4.

The Heritage Professional.

"I used to think my job was to educate. Now I see it's about starting conversations – and creating space for others to share their own meanings. That shift didn't just change my work – it changed how I saw my role. I stopped trying to have all the answers. Instead, I focused on making room for questions. It turns out, the skills that mattered most were about empathy, collaboration, and knowing when to step back. This became the kind of work I'd been looking for all along."



EMPATHY SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE OF HERITAGE

Active listening: creating space for many points of view.

Facilitation: designing and guiding processes that involve others meaningfully.

Emotional intelligence: navigating sensitive topics with care and empathy.

Cultural awareness: recognising and valuing diversity.

Conflict sensitivity: turning tensions into opportunities for dialogue.

Collaborative thinking: working across disciplines and sectors.

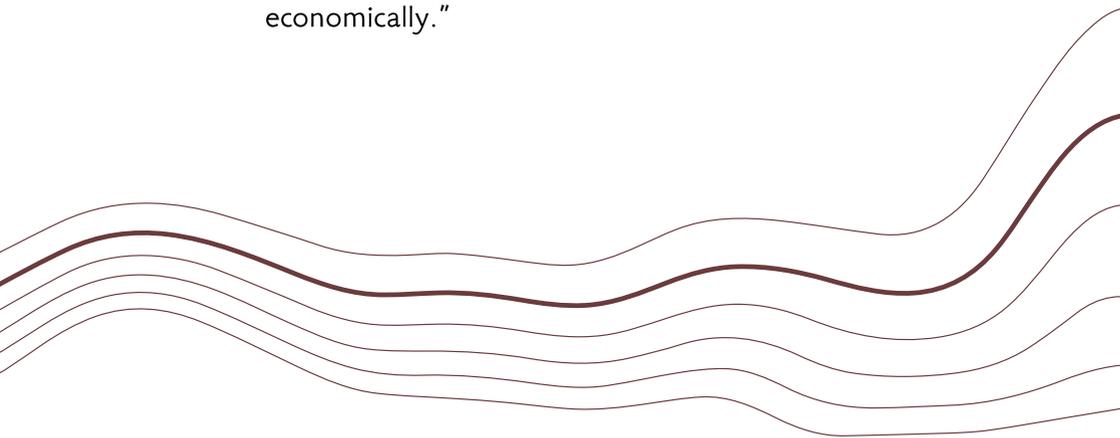
Flexibility: adapting to the needs of people and context.

Reflective practice: constantly learning and growing through experience.

Chapter 5.

The Policy-maker.

“From my desk, I saw how things changed. Not in dramatic headlines, but in the steady build-up of trust. When communities were included – really included – they showed up. Not just for heritage, but for each other. People who once felt left out began to take part. Dialogue started replacing friction. And slowly, the work grew more relevant – and more resilient. Participatory interpretation wasn’t just good policy. It made sense – socially, democratically, and economically.”



THE CHANGE WE WANT TO BRING

For heritage professionals.

EMPATHS gives heritage professionals new skills – in facilitation, collaboration, and inclusive engagement. It expands their role from providing content to facilitating dialogue and co-creation – adding new rewarding dimensions to their expertise and deepening the impact of their work.

For heritage institutions.

Adopting participatory approaches leads to stronger relationships with local communities and stakeholders. Interpretive outputs become richer and more inclusive. In turn, this helps institutions become more relevant and resilient in the face of change.

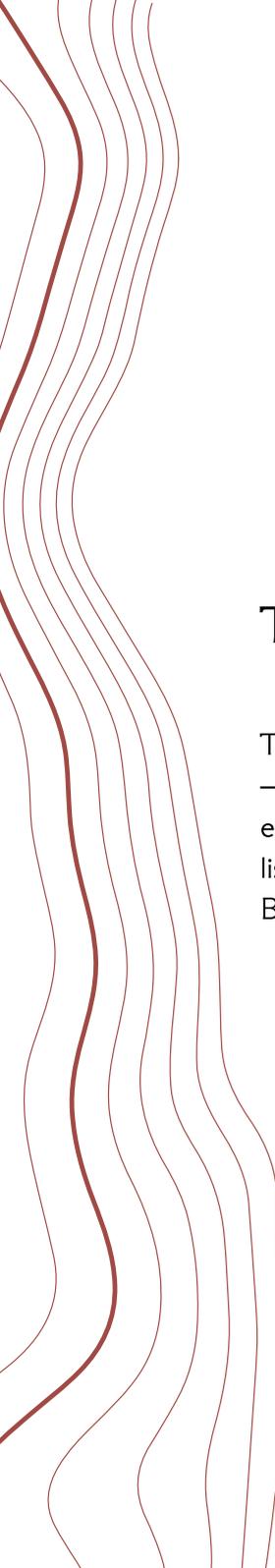
For the heritage sector.

Participatory heritage interpretation modernises the field and addresses urgent challenges – from social justice to sustainability. It strengthens heritage as a driver of positive change: a space for active citizenship, where shared meaning fosters long-term social cohesion and democratic renewal.

How do ideas travel?

Printing press from the Vafeiadis Printing House, Adrianople, late 19th century. This machine sent ideas into circulation, challenging the status quo. It printed the first banknotes of the Political Administration of Thrace and was later donated to the Ethnological Museum by Amalia Sotiriopoulou, whose grandfather distributed revolutionary leaflets before founding his own press. More than just a machine, it turned change into print. If the future we want starts now, which ideas will you help set in motion — and how?





The end?

This future isn't guaranteed but it's possible – and it starts now. Every action counts, every voice matters. Be the one who listens. Be the one who invites others in. Be the change.



Endorse the EMPATHS Manifesto

Explore the project

empaths-project.eu

Join the community

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**Apply the EMPATHS principles in your practice.
Contact us.**

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IMAGES CREDITS

p. 4, 6, 8, 14:

Archive of Parco Archeologico Campi Flegrei

p. 10, 12, 18:

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p. 14, 16, 20, 22:

Archive of Ethnological Museum of Thrace

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