



# ANALYTICAL DOCUMENT

ONLINE PEER-LEARNING VISIT HOSTED BY  
CITY OF REGGIO EMILIA

## RENOVATION OF THE SAN PIETRO BENEDICTINE COMPLEX: CULTURAL ENHANCEMENT AND SOCIAL INNOVATION

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Focus of the “RENOVATION OF THE SAN PIETRO CLOISTERS” online peer-learning visit

The online peer learning visit «[Renovation of the San Pietro Benedictine complex: Cultural enhancement and social innovation](#)» hosted by the city of Reggio Emilia focused on the adaptive reuse of San Pietro Cloisters as an Open Lab and hub for social, cultural and business activities. The construction of the Cloisters ended in 1524. The buildings boast typical Renaissance design from architects Bartolomeo Spani and Leonardo Pacchioni.

The key components of the re-development and adaptive reuse of the Cloisters have been the involvement and collaboration of the local authorities with citizens, businesses and researchers to promote cultural experimentation, social innovation and young entrepreneurship for a collaborative economy.

### Background of the “Renovation of the San Pietro Cloisters”

The city of Reggio Emilia has been confronted with industrial structural changes and the challenging transition from a manufacturing economy to a knowledge and innovation economy. This has led to changes also in the urban infrastructure and in the historic city centre, where the Cloisters are located. The Cloisters themselves were not open to the public until 2005, when the municipality took over the state property. The idea for the “disused” Benedictine monastery was to use the renovation and its adaptive reuse to push the regeneration of the historic centre, improve its attractiveness and co-create a new cultural, social and economic hub for the historic centre, bringing the urban society together.

### Main features of the “Renovation of the San Pietro Cloisters”

There are three key features of the Cloisters’ adaptive reuse:

1. **The restoration of the Cloisters’ complex** attributed to Giulio Romano with the careful renovation of the Cloisters, the construction of a new building on the basic structure of former demolished annexed buildings, and the redevelopment of the courtyards as a new open public space linking the Cloisters with the new building complex.
2. **The participatory process with local stakeholders** (citizens, cultural associations, artists, social innovators, researchers) to co-design the mission and activities of the Open Lab to be established in the renovated buildings.
3. **The implementation of a cultural calendar of events** to be hosted in the Cloisters (in particular for contemporary arts).
4. **The establishment of an Open Hub** to host educational programmes and training in creative and digital skills and co-working spaces for entrepreneurs to prototype new goods and services, bringing jobs and production back to the historic centre.

The intervention gave new life to the monumental complex searching for a balanced relationship between ancient and contemporary, between rediscovering spaces by stimulating new relationships and establishing new compatible uses, with attention to the social role of urban regeneration.

For a visual introduction to the project of the San Pietro Cloisters watch this [video](#), for pictures click this [link](#), for a short video introducing the complex click [here](#).

## ANALYSIS

### The social soul of San Pietro Cloisters – The Open Lab

The reference and coordination framework of the Open Lab is the “[Neighbourhood Common Good](#)” programme of the city of Reggio Emilia through which projects take shape for the co-creation of services and the enhancement of skills and active involvement of citizens. The Open Lab has been funded so far with € 1,250,000 (80% ERDF; 20% municipality of Reggio Emilia). The Open Lab has been developed through a co-design process that resulted in the definition of the mission, tasks and strategic guidelines for the Open Lab management model and functions.

#### Objective

The social soul of the San Pietro Cloisters is represented by its Open Lab. Its objective is to offer experimentation opportunities to citizens, informal groups, local organisations and young entrepreneurs to innovate in the (public) welfare services and social entrepreneurship in Reggio Emilia. The Open Lab is meant to be an enabling space to empower communities to develop new approaches and solutions in a co-design process. It provides spaces for people to meet up and develop and implement projects together, creating economic, social and cultural values.

#### Management

The Open Lab is managed by a local consortium of social cooperatives (selected through a public tender), working in the social, education and cultural sectors. They offer training and capacity building to its users, modulated on the maturation stages of social impact projects. Along the themes of food, culture and education, co-design sessions were organised through which 16 social projects were defined: 7 on education, 6 on culture, 3 on food. Project ideas were structured and validated through dedicated workshops. In the end, 8 projects were selected to be included in the incubation process of the Open Lab.

#### Provided services

The five main services the consortium of social cooperatives offers during the incubation process are:

1. Incubation and accompanying / mentoring
2. Education and culture
3. Co-working
4. Help Desk
5. [Cafeteria](#)

#### Two examples of developed projects

1. Community Wi-Fi  
Through a collaboration between the municipality, an internet provider and social centres, the supply of internet in areas with no access can be improved at more favourable market conditions.
2. “Food” projects



Through a collaboration between the municipality, the Manager of the Open Lab cafeteria, social centres and horticulturists, three food projects were developed to spread a sustainable agri-food culture based on a short production, distribution and consumption chain.

For further information about the Open Lab, take a look at this [presentation](#) or watch this [video](#).

## Findings and recommendations

Based on discussion in break-out groups, participants in the online peer learning visit have come up with the following findings and recommendations for the engagement of (business) communities in the San Pietro Cloisters.

### **Attract continuously new actors eager to get involved and use the Cloisters.**

- Define the communities you want to reach and involve. Think about how to reach them best.
- Use the physical space of the Cloisters for activities that attract people and “change makers”. Bazars and markets of local (food) products are good opportunities to attract a variety of people. Offer workshops, i.e., how to prepare a particular local dish or summer schools i.e., playing with a known musician (look for artist volunteer programmes). Use these events to inform about the place, its activities and opportunities.
- Via blogs, let the “users” of the Cloisters tell their stories, what they are doing and which opportunities the Open lab offers.
- Facilitate thematic «get together» with stakeholders from different spheres. Meetings should aim to develop joint projects and to get organised.
- Organise meetings i.e., to promote and organise community-supported agriculture (CSA model)
- Organise «tabling days» during which initiatives, NGOs, etc. can present themselves as well as their ideas and network.

### **Attract regional businesses to support the Open lab / business incubator.**

- Check for partnership opportunities between (social) businesses in the region and the businesses in the incubator.
- Partnership opportunities can arise with businesses, whose Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) can be related to the businesses in the incubator (be creative!) or with businesses whose entrepreneurial activities can be linked with the businesses in the incubator or who might benefit from the services of the businesses in the incubator. Contact such businesses, show the potential links and partnership opportunities (also for a good social and cultural cause) and connect them with the businesses in the incubator (“match-up market”).

### **Look for “alternative” funding and financing of the Cloisters**

For inspirations take a look at the following projects:

- Funding the cooperative city ([link](#))
- 2<sup>nd</sup> chance good-practices compilation ([chapter 4](#))
- Alternative funding sources for the reactivation of vacant buildings ([presentation](#))

## The cultural soul of San Pietro Cloisters

### Quality intervention and adaptive re-use

The project is an example of the modern approach to cultural heritage conservation, preservation and (re)use, a great example of a high-quality renovation. The baroque architecture of the former Benedictines' cloisters was based on the architectural concept of Giulio Romano – renowned manneristic architect, painter and artist. In fact, the Cloisters have never been finished architecturally and artistically. The “non finito” (unfinished) aspect has been recognized as one of the subjects of the preservation approach, a philosophy that could be valorised.

Fresco restoration and the architectural conservation and restoration works were realised under the supervision of the regional office of Monuments Preservation and on the basis of the architectural design of renovation (Studio Zamboni Architecture). The restoration process demanded the use of antique techniques. On the other hand, a new additional building has been built on the place of the former (less valuable) missing storage /stable, providing an opportunity to bring a new and more contemporary architectural approach to the renovation.

High quality interventions/ renovation and adaptive re-use of the Cloisters were done with ambition, not only to preserve and present the monumental body of the Cloisters complex, but also to revitalise and develop the neighbourhood – to offer the space for social connection between people, to offer a hub for cultural and social activities, education, collaboration, experimentation, etc.

The renovation and functional recovery of the building costed € 2,700,000 in total (€ 1,750,000 from ERDF; € 950,000 from the municipality of Reggio Emilia).

About the process of the renovation and the architectural concept [see the video here](#).

### Cultural and social use rooted in the history and tradition of the Cloisters.

Cultural heritage is an important part of Reggio Emilia's urban regeneration strategy. During the Cloisters' renovation process, the municipality organised public discussions with civil associations, foundations and cultural institutions to exchange on the future use of the place. The main idea for the renovation was to support urban regeneration and the requalification of the historic place, while providing space for uses that could match community's needs and interests.

Tangible and intangible values of the historic place were considered, respecting and valorising the historic “messages” of the Cloisters into the present cultural and social reuse:

- **“Ora et Labora”** – representing the two souls of the Cloisters complex: a hub for social and cultural activities and an Open Lab to support innovation.
- **“Non finito”** – disadvantages turned into advantages. The fact that the Cloisters were architecturally unfinished was understood both as a challenge and as an opportunity: offering the open spaces in “non finito” style/condition could provoke a creative and flexible use to different types of cultural activities (“un-finished” place as a key element of the artistic work, place of artistic interpretation, etc.).

As a result, the Cloisters has two new (refreshed) “souls”: a cultural soul and a social soul. The municipality has created a hub that gathers the local authority, artists and third sector with an artistic mission; citizens, businesses and researchers for cultural experimentation.

The place can be used all seasons for different purposes: presentation of antique, modern and contemporary art; cultural events (exhibitions, concerts, performances), educational workshops, scientific seminars, digital transformation, culinary use (with the presence of the cafeteria as an asset to discuss education, culture and healthy food).

For information about the activities taking place in the Cloisters, visit this [website](#).

## The Cloisters as a political manifesto for cultural policies

The Cloisters is used as a place of culture, a physical place to manifest Reggio Emilia's cultural policy. The following objectives are pursued:

- to give continuity and impulse to the [European Photography festival](#) (Historically hosted at the Cloisters for more than 16 years and one of the main events of the Cloisters).
- to showcase other important exhibitions throughout the year.
- to provide a summer programme of high-quality events such as dance, concerts, performances, prose and opera, etc. in the Cloisters or close by.
- to propose educational workshops for the promotion of architectural heritage of rare beauty and for the enhancement of specific activities in progress.
- to valorise heritage values – material/ tangible and intellectual/ intangible values

The complex of the former Cloisters has become a “cultural heart” of the city: a place of cultural gathering, collaboration and communication, a meeting point of different artistic and cultural languages (exhibitions, music, dance) and a place to meet and eat (cooperation with consortium for culinary; cafeteria). Many concerts, contemporary dance shows and many other events take place in this heritage setting.

## Impacts

The cultural heritage of the Cloisters and the cultural and educational activities taking place there contribute to:

- Regeneration of the urban fabric in the historic centre which now foresees future sustainable developments.
- Quality of space; a great attention is paid to beauty and Right to Beauty as well as wellbeing.
- Cultural heritage and health & wellbeing with the example of an exhibition helping people with Alzheimer disease.
- A place for greater social innovation and inclusion: a key focus is on inclusion of people with different backgrounds, with the main idea that “cultural heritage has to include all people” (all ages, all backgrounds, including vulnerable people).
- Dissemination of the values of art, entertainment, creativity and education.
- International recognition and cooperation: the San Pietro Cloisters are participating in an international photography festival created in Reggio Emilia, which will later travel to Brussels.
- School programmes and cooperation with schools.

## Management and coordination of the cultural activities

The different cultural activities hosted in the Cloisters are managed by the municipality in co-operation with a Scientific Technical Committee (CTS). In the CTS, important cultural associations and institutions as well as international individuals from the cultural sector are represented: National Foundation of Dance - Aterballetto, I Teatri Foundation, Peri-Merulo Musical Institute, Palazzo Magnani Foundation, Consortium 45, etc.

The CTS provides technical advice to the municipality and oversees the planning and management of cultural events and activities in line with the philosophy and mission of the Cloisters. This allows to ensure the quality of cultural interventions to be hosted in the Cloisters.

The Emilia-Romagna Region, in particular the Regional Department of Architectural Heritage and Landscapes, offers crucial administrative and financial support. Ownership is shared. Outdoor spaces belong to all partners.

## Findings and recommendations

Based on discussion in break-out groups, participants in the online peer learning visit have come up with the following findings and recommendations to embrace the cultural soul of the San Pietro Cloisters.

### **Valorise and promote the San Pietro Cloisters for its intrinsic heritage value:**

- San Pietro Cloisters complex has a potential to promote its history (Giulio Romano painter and architect), its tangible and intangible cultural heritage and beauty.
- The richness of history and quality of heritage fabric in the central neighbourhood of the city is the right hub for cultural events and can truly enhance quality of life in the city.
- Valorise the Cloisters as a new cultural and social neighbourhood: the urban space surrounding the Cloisters has benefitted from the renovation and new cultural use of the Cloisters and the municipality can make the most of this advantage.
- When promoting cultural events offered at the Cloisters, it is necessary to also communicate about the main philosophy and ideas of the Cloisters' mission to the citizens and visitors.
- A Guidebook for the restoration, adaptation and reuse of the former Baroque Benedictine's Cloister is being prepared by Studio Zamboni Architecture. It will promote the high quality of intervention and restoration, new contemporary designed building addition and the unique philosophy of reuse: the Cloisters as a hub for cultural activities, open space for educational activities, artistic approach to not finished spaces, digital transformation, social innovation, experimental projects, concerts, exhibitions, book exhibitions, performances... All the activities are realised with the offering of spaces and programmes to fragile groups of people (vulnerable groups).

### **Strengthen the international attractiveness of the San Pietro Cloisters by capitalising on local heritage forces:**

- Reggio Emilia is internationally renowned for its approach to experimental education of small children (Infant-Toddler centres – experimental education tradition) and it has created international networks. This educational innovative model can attract families with children to town. More information is available [here](#);
- Reggio Emilia is also famous for its culinary products: Parmeggiano Reggiano cheese, Lambrusco wine, and other local products, and the city can capitalise on the international reputation of these products.
- The international visibility of cultural activities (contemporary art, the international photography festival “Fotografia Europea” with its 20,000 tickets sold) taking place in the Cloisters can be coupled with other cultural and touristic activities.
- There is a high-speed train station near the Cloisters – designed by worldwide famous architect Santiago Calatrava, which influences the value of the surrounding area.
- Local community rather than tourism is the priority for the Municipality. Paradoxically, this fact can make the city attractive for tourists.
- Reggio Emilia – is the place where the Italian flag was “born” – Promoting this part of history becomes a challenge in the city.



## **Empower the local cultural and creative sector by finding the best match between cultural heritage and culture and creative industries:**

- Host new artists –residence of artists opens more creativity and new ideas for art. Provide space and opportunities for young artists to create and develop their projects. Allow them to rent spaces in the Cloisters.
- Provide space not only for professionals, but also for locals presenting low-threshold cultural activities. Use such activities to attract people that are less used to “consume” culture.
- Keep the space in permanent use by enabling different types of activities that could also emulate new creations, for instance by providing co-working spaces or activities.
- Allow cooking sessions with local original products that have been internationally recognised for their higher level of culinary tradition. This can be also the opportunity to educate the public about healthy food. Think about specific programmes for children, etc.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

### **Main takeaways of the “Renovation of the San Pietro Cloisters” online peer-learning visit:**

- The “Renovation of the San Pietro Cloisters” presents a fine example of a qualitative intervention and adaptive re-use of a “disused” heritage building (here a former monastery) and how a heritage building can manifest a cultural policy.
- Disused places like the San Pietro Cloisters can be revived through a co-design process, with the support of the local communities, to become a people-centred place for cultural and social innovation.
- Adaptive reuse of heritage buildings is based on community needs and interests – leading to the regeneration of the Cloisters based on two souls: a cultural and a social soul.
- Co-management of civic spaces is possible.
- Community involvement is rather about qualitative than quantitative involvement, but this should not prevent from constantly looking to engage new communities.

## FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS (A NON-EXHAUSTIVE LIST)

City/Region/Stakeholder	Main learning points	Future use of ideas and knowledge gained – Projects that were shared and that could be transferable to other contexts
Warsaw, POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews (Poland)	-community approach - needs assessment before programming - lot of cooperation between different players	Try to remember about needs assessment
Europa Nostra	There is one sentence that i would definitely remember for forever and that is when you are looking for financial support and budgeting you should not search for help/support but you should provide an offer. Also, one big lesson was the success is possible only through cross sector collaboration.	
Urbanex, Croatia	It is important to assess the local context in terms of what the local community needs and wants in the area in the planning process of the renovation. Common governance and good cooperation are achievable if set properly.	I will work harder on establishing relationships with the local community and public bodies. Inclusion of the locals through educational activities starting from an early age is super important in raising awareness of local heritage value (tangible and intangible).
City of Mannheim (Germany)	Impressive, how a cultural heritage is put into a living lab Integration of different groups of the society with different focusses (art, work, food, lab) Putting together different national, European and international programmes	Looking how to adopt some of the ideas and methods to our project. Cultural heritage sites are very unique and have specific recommendations, however, methods can be transferred onto those sites.
City of Ghent (Belgium)	Don't be afraid of spontaneous associations and really make space for them, it doesn't have to conflict with your strategy, on the contrary. The right process brings the best results. Even if you're with little people, something like San Pietro	Small steps. First share the vision of San Pietro with my colleagues and talk about the benefits and the practices. So that we are no longer afraid of it, but brainstorm about small little things we can change to

	<p>shows that it is manageable in the right atmosphere and right dialogue between municipality and the inhabitants and cultural actors, social, economic and educational actors. Sometimes you can begin small, but it can grow within the good climate. The process is sometimes more important than the result.</p>	<p>give space to participatory projects, sometimes small, some bigger lines as well. It is no longer the question, do we want participatory, it is the question, how we embed it?</p>
City of Athens (Greece)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Good projects need dedication</li> <li>2. Municipalities play a big role in shaping a suitable ground for the prosperity of the city</li> <li>3. Inclusiveness is the go-to for successful projects</li> </ol>	<p>I will compile a report to the Head Office and try to transfer social innovation practices in home country.</p>
City of Celje (Slovenia)	<p>The right approach - communication and cooperation - adapted to the specific environment can enable good integrated product and complex development.</p> <p>Social integration and involvement of local community is crucial.</p> <p>A good architectural approach, which considers the specifics of the historic building and the conditions / limitations /possibilities for its conservation and presentation and engagement with inclusion of various projects, can help to revitalise the cultural object and place it in the centre of cultural and social development of local community.</p>	<p>Application of the principle of cooperation of the local community with the administration. Preparation of workshops with the local community. Introduction of the 'non finito' principle. Idea of versatility of the object and projects.</p>

## LIST OF PROJECTS SHARED

Projects mentioned throughout the Online visit:

- [Findings from the project Culture for Cities and Regions](#)
- [European Photography Festival](#)
- [Association of Architecture, Zamboni](#)
- [Atelier dei Saponi, PAUSA](#)
- [Chiostri di San Pietro](#)
- [The Neighborhood as a commons](#)
- [Kitchen for kids](#)
- [Diary for the community](#) (blog)
- [Institute of Local History](#)
- [Comune di Reggio Emilia](#), official website of Reggio Emilia

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