

Everyday Practices and the Reframing of Territorial Representations: Inhabitants, Agency, and Public Action

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Everyday Practices and the Reframing of Territorial Representations: Inhabitants, Agency, and Public Action

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Abstract. This article offers a reflexive account of an action research approach that involved local residents in shaping territorial representations for tourism and heritage development. It examines how the capability approach, social innovation theory, and critical heritage studies can be operationalized through participatory public action. The central hypothesis is that territorial reconversion can produce lasting effects only if it strengthens residents' capacity to influence not only the transformation of their everyday living environments, but also the institutional representations that define, value, and ultimately shape territorial strategies. Drawing on a four-year programme in La Porte du Hainaut (Northern France), the article analyses an action research process combining territorial diagnosis, participatory workshops, actor-network building, and research-creation. The findings show that spaces for critical reflection enable residents' knowledge and everyday practices to challenge dominant representations, broaden definitions of heritage, and strengthen collective agency by generating counter-narratives around gender, migration, industrial memory, and the ordinary uses of heritage sites. Finally, the article highlights the university's role as a mediator between institutions and citizens while discussing the structural limits of such approaches, including unstable funding, conflicting temporalities, and shifting political priorities.

Keywords. Territorial representations; Everyday practices; Capability approach; Social innovation; Critical heritage studies; Research-action; Collective Agency

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, many European areas undergoing economic and social restructuring have been shaped by policies centered on cultural and heritage valorisation, often articulated through strategies of territorial attractiveness. Frequently inspired by top-down models, these approaches have prioritized the development of iconic facilities, the spectacularization of selected heritages, and the construction of territorial narratives primarily oriented towards external audiences.

While some of these strategies have generated notable economic outcomes – as in the case of Emscher Park in Germany (Lusso 2014) or Spanish cities such as Bilbao (Caldéron et al. 2005) – others have failed to achieve the expected outcomes despite significant public investment. Even where they have contributed to the revitalization of declining areas, these development strategies have revealed significant shortcomings in relation to the quality of everyday living. These include forms of symbolic exclusion affecting specific social groups, the persistence of precarious and low-paid employment among the most vulnerable populations, processes of gentrification and limitations for shared civic practices (Beungeut 2013; Moulaert et al. 2005; Rodriguez et al. 2001).

Restructuring processes thus emerge as a particularly sensitive field, where economic objectives may come into tension with social ones. In response, some policy frameworks have moved away from top-down redevelopment models in favor of place-based strategies. These latter are rooted in the social, historical, and cultural specificities of territories. They seek to mobilize local stakeholders in defining priorities and to invest in the development of local capacities and skills (Barca et al. 2012; Barca, Carrosio 2020).

However, such endogenous approaches are not sufficient in themselves. They must be complemented by a critical reflection on the symbolic and cognitive dimensions of territorial valorisation. It is at this level that territories are first constructed, through the ways they are interpreted, represented, and discursively framed. Before any material intervention takes place, public discourse and evaluative criteria shape what is made visible, recognized, and legitimized, thereby influencing how a territory is concretely constructed.

These observations highlight the need to critically examine how territorial narratives are produced, circulated, and potentially reshaped in relation to residents' everyday practices and inhabitants' lived experiences. Hence, this paper proposes a shift in perspective, moving away from large-scale, investment-driven strategies aimed primarily at external attractiveness. It instead proposes an approach that places the public and collective dimensions of dwelling at the core of socio-spatial reconfiguration.

The hypothesis is that reconversion policies can produce positive effects only if they strengthen inhabitants' capacity to influence the transformation of their everyday living environments. Even prior to that, reconversion policies must enable inhabitants to intervene in institutional representations. These latter are not merely discursive: they are performative, as they orient concrete strategies and actions.

This article draws on a research-action experience carried out by the academic *Chair for Tourism and Heritage Valorization*¹, focused on La Porte du Hainaut (see Figure 1), a post-mining region in northern France characterized by a significant industrial heritage and persistent social vulnerabilities. The Chair, directed by Arnaud Huftier and coordinated by Irene Sartoretti, fosters and guide research-action initiatives. It mediates between residents, public institutions, and other stakeholders, and supports the co-production of territorial knowledge and heritage narratives. It serves as a territory-based platform for collaboration among local actors.

Rather than adopting tourism as a sectorial or autonomous analytical lens, the Chair is approached as a space in which tourism is considered within broader inhabiting policies and territorial practices, including social life, public space, and everyday forms of dwelling. In this perspective, tourism is not understood as an external driver primarily oriented toward attractiveness, but as one dimension of the ways territories are inhabited, represented, and governed, and through which institutional narratives acquire concrete effects on socio-spatial transformations. The article thus examines how residents' daily practices, forms of dwelling, and attachments can contribute to the reconfiguration of institutional heritage narratives and guide public action beyond sector-based policy frameworks.

¹ The Chair's activities, research programmes, collaborative projects and publications are documented on its institutional website: <https://www.uphf.fr/larsh/recherche/chaire-tourisme-valorisation-patrimoine>.



Figure 1 - Map showing the location of La Porte du Hainaut, highlighted in dark red (source: adapted from Wikipedia).

LA PORTE DU HAINAUT: INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE, LIVED EXPERIENCE, AND THE GAPS OF INSTITUTIONAL REPRESENTATION



Figure 2: The UNESCO-listed former coal mining site of Wallers-Arenberg (Source: La Porte du Hainaut Tourist Office).

La Porte du Hainaut is characterized by a significant industrial heritage. Eight former mining sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, together with the regional natural park, form the core of local valorisation strategies and institutional narratives (see Figure 2). These assets are highly visible, formally recognized, and central to how the territory is represented and promoted. However, they often remain disconnected from the lived realities of residents. Persistent socioeconomic vulnerabilities—such as uneven access to services and high unemployment—continue to shape the rhythms and possibilities of everyday life in La Porte du Hainaut (SIG Politique de la Ville 2024). Long-term industrial restructuring has further entrenched these dynamics, making everyday experiences of the territory deeply uneven. This highlights a persistent gap between institutional representations and local experience. While formal strategies tend to emphasize emblematic heritage and landscape assets, they frequently overlook the social, cultural, and affective dimensions through which the territory is inhabited on a daily basis.

In this context, structural processes such as economic reconversion, heritage policies, and symbolic labeling – exemplified by UNESCO recognition and natural park promotion – only partially resonate with residents’ everyday experiences. The resulting gaps are not merely deficits but are actively negotiated through ordinary practices, local attachments, and affective relations to place. Beyond its visible monuments, La Porte du Hainaut also possesses less institutionalized forms of heritage that sustain social and cultural vitality. Everyday practices, associative initiatives, and citizen-led collectives contribute to knowledge transmission, strengthen local ties and cooperation, and shape residents’ everyday experiences. Although often dispersed and weakly articulated within official frameworks, these “invisible” heritages constitute a latent resource for territorial reconfiguration. Residents thus emerge as bearers of local and experiential knowledge and

narratives that complement, challenge, and potentially reorient formal valorisation strategies toward more inclusive and socially sensitive approaches to territorial transformation.

From this perspective, dwelling is considered as an analytical lens encompassing both material and symbolic dimensions: on the one hand, a living environment shaped by industrial legacies, social vulnerabilities, and institutional transformations; on the other, an embodied, affective, and relational experience through which inhabitants produce meaning, attachment, and forms of collective life.

COLLECTIVE AGENCY AND THE CO-PRODUCTION OF TERRITORIAL NARRATIVES: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The approach developed within the Chair is grounded in a triple theoretical framework that articulates community-based perspectives, social innovation theory, and critical heritage studies. This articulation allows everyday life to be addressed simultaneously as a field of practices, a space of political agency, and a site of symbolic production (Mandich, Rampazi 2009).

First, community-based tourism approaches provide a useful point of departure insofar as they place inhabitants at the center of governance and decision-making processes and emphasize issues of participation, recognition, and redistribution (Jackson 2025). While these approaches emerged primarily in rural contexts of the Global south, they often rely on a relatively homogeneous conception of “community”, which is questionable (Blackstock 2005). Nevertheless, their core principles remain transferable. In the European context examined here, tourism is not a matter of subsistence, and public infrastructures are already in place; however, issues of territorial justice, citizen participation, and the legitimacy of local knowledge remain central. It is in this sense that community-based tourism principles are extended to our countries through initiatives such as the *International Social Tourism Organization* (ISTO). ISTO provides useful principles for resident participation, local governance, and equitable redistribution of economic and social benefits. Nevertheless, this kind of approach is not sufficient, as it largely remains embedded in a functional logic. Participation is justified insofar as it contributes to tourism performance, territorial attractiveness, or the delivery of measurable outcomes (Blackstock 2005). In contrast, the *Life Beyond Tourism* platform represents a more radical departure. It challenges both the market-oriented conception of heritage policies and the instrumentalization of participation itself. Heritage is no longer treated as a resource to be valorized primarily for touristic or economic ends, but as a relational and symbolic medium through which social cohesion, intercultural dialogue, and shared territorial meaning can be cultivated. Participation is thus reframed as an intrinsic value: it strengthens inhabitants’ capacity to act collectively, co-produce territorial narratives, and construct shared practices of dwelling, independently of tourism objectives. In this way, the approach aligns with a non-functional, socially-centered understanding of heritage and participation, situating everyday practices and ordinary forms of dwelling at the heart of territorial transformation, and providing a theoretical anchor for the Chair’s research-action initiatives.

In this perspective, the Chair explicitly rejects a trickle-down conception of solidarity, according to which social benefits would emerge only as secondary effects of broad economic or territorial development processes. This critique follows Stanley’s (2002) argument that solidarity cannot be treated as a mere byproduct of economic growth but must instead be regarded as an active dimension of development itself. Complementing this, the capability approach provides a framework for understanding why residents’ agency and capacities are central to territorial transformation. Amartya Sen (2001) emphasizes the importance of expanding individuals’ real freedoms to act and make meaningful choices in their environment, highlighting the structural and social conditions that enable—or constrain—agency. Martha Nussbaum (2011) further identifies specific capabilities, such as affiliation, practical reason, control over one’s environment, and the

ability to participate in collective life, which are essential for living a dignified and socially embedded life.

Social innovation theory, as developed by Moulaert et al. (2005, 2007; Moulaert, Nussbaumer 2008), explicitly draws on these ideas: it operationalizes the capability approach by focusing on collective processes that enable individuals and groups to exercise their capacities in practice. Social innovation is understood not as technological or economic novelty, but as a collaborative process that creates new spaces of action, legitimacy, and reflexivity. It enables underrepresented groups, associations, and informal collectives to produce reflexivity, challenge dominant representations, and open institutional arenas where alternative practices and narratives can emerge (Bifulco 2009; Vitale 2024). In this way, the freedoms and capabilities highlighted by Sen and Nussbaum are translated into actionable, collective processes that mobilize everyday practices, local knowledge, and social capacities for territorial transformation.

Finally, this focus on agency and reflexivity is extended to the field of heritage through the lens of critical heritage studies. From this perspective, heritage is not understood as an object endowed with intrinsic value, but as the outcome of social, political, and institutional processes of selection, narration, and legitimation (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). This approach highlights the power relations embedded in heritage-making and the ways in which certain histories, practices, and attachments are rendered visible while others remain marginalized or invisible (Auclair, Hertzog 2015; Harrison et al. 2023). Labels, classifications, and conservation practices are interpreted as performative instruments that actively shape collective representations and territorial priorities (Auclair et al. 2018).

This triple theoretical framework – community-based approaches, social innovation, and critical heritage studies – underpins all of the Chair's work and guides the implementation of its projects. It is operationalized through three complementary strategies: the structuring of a local ecosystem of actors before dispersed; the participation of inhabitants in the co-creation of a shared territorial narrative; and the production of knowledge through research-creation, conceived as a driver of cognitive and institutional transformation (Sartoretti et al. 2026).

FIELDWORK AS COLLECTIVE ACTION: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The theoretical framework described above was operationalized through an action research approach in which data collection, participation, mediation, and knowledge production were conceived as interdependent processes, emerging through interactions among researchers from a wide range of disciplines (sociology, geography, history, literature, linguistics, management, the arts, and economics), institutions, and residents, rather than as a sequence of separate stages. Within this framework, the university acted as a third-party actor—a neutral intermediary creating conditions for reflexivity, encounter, dialogue, and the co-production of territorial knowledge and debate among these stakeholders.

Consistent with the principles of action research (Reason, Bradbury 2008), the fieldwork adopted an flexible methodological approach. Rather than being standardized across the entire project or fully designed in advance, the methods, data collection procedures, participatory formats, and facilitation arrangements were continuously adapted in response to arising opportunities arising, partnerships that developed over time, the needs expressed by different territorial actors, the characteristics of the publics involved, and the specific objectives of each intervention.

The research design was structured around four complementary and interconnected methodological axes: territorial diagnosis, collaborative ecosystem building, participatory knowledge production, research-creation and artistic co-production.

The first axis consisted of a territorial diagnosis aimed at documenting both the structural dynamics of the territory and residents' everyday experiences. This initial phase established the empirical basis

upon which the following participatory and collaborative actions were progressively developed. The diagnosis combined several complementary methods. First, regional and local attractiveness policies were analysed in order to identify institutional representations of heritage and territorial development. Second, residents and domestic visitors were surveyed regarding their practices, perceptions, and opinions concerning local heritage and living environments. Questionnaires were administered by students in open public settings – including markets, car parks, and the entrances of heritage sites – with each survey producing between 300 and 500 responses. The quantitative surveys were complemented by semi-structured interviews conducted across the different research strands with key institutional actors, privileged witnesses, and a subsample of survey respondents. These interviews allowed a more in-depth exploration of the themes emerging from the questionnaires while documenting the diversity of local experiences and interpretations. In parallel, systematic observations were conducted at key sites of everyday activity in order to document ordinary uses of places and interactions between inhabitants and heritage spaces. This phase also included a comprehensive mapping of cultural, associative, economic, and institutional actors, making it possible to identify existing networks, available resources, and potential partners for the subsequent stages of the research.

By combining policy analysis, surveys, interviews, participant observation, and actor mapping, this first axis provided a comprehensive understanding of both the social and spatial dynamics of the territory. It revealed not only highly visible heritage assets, such as industrial sites, but also less institutionalized resources rooted in everyday life. Most importantly, it highlighted discrepancies between institutional representations of the territory and residents' lived experiences, thereby providing the empirical foundation for the collaborative and participatory phases that followed.

Building on the territorial diagnosis and actor mapping, the second axis focused on structuring a territorial ecosystem of actors that had previously been fragmented and only weakly connected. The objective was to interconnect research, education, and civic engagement, creating synergies that allowed actors to conceive and implement projects collectively rather than in isolation. As noted above, the university's role as intermediary was operationalized here through the ongoing coordination of this network. The network ultimately involved 21 of the 49 municipalities constituting La Porte du Hainaut, together with its central tourist office, which played a central role in heritage promotion and public dissemination. All 19 public, private, and associative museums within the territory participated in the project. Some ten economic actors were also involved, ranging from small and medium-sized enterprises operating in tourism and culture – including the Saint-Amand-les-Eaux thermal baths and the film collective *Losange Noir* – to organisations contributing to local cultural development.

Seven associations, both publicly funded and voluntary, were likewise integrated into the research network. These included the *Agence régionale de la langue picarde*, the collective *Usinor-Cité de l'Acier*, composed of former steelworkers engaged in preserving industrial memory, and social-support associations such as *Main dans la Main*, whose participation facilitated the inclusion of women from socially underrepresented and racialized backgrounds.

Academic collaborations further broadened the interdisciplinary dimension of the project. Partner institutions included the Université catholique de Lille and the Université de Sfax (virtual reality and innovative mediation), the Université de Picardie Jules Verne (literary studies), the Université de Sherbrooke (archival analysis), and the Université de Perpignan (tourism management). The network was complemented by two French organisations specialising in innovative heritage mediation. Students also constituted a major component of this collaborative ecosystem. Around 100 students participated through internships, master's dissertations, doctoral projects, and four professional master's programmes (History, Media and Mediation; Metaverse and Digital Environments; Heritage and Territorial Resources; Tourism and Mobility). Their involvement simultaneously contributed to research production, professional training, and territorial engagement.

Together, these institutional, academic, associative, and educational partnerships created a durable framework for collaborative research. Over a four-year period, roughly 50 collaborative workshops, mediation activities, and public restitution events were organised in multimedia libraries, theatres, museums, community venues, and open public spaces. Beyond supporting individual research projects, these repeated interactions progressively reinforced cooperation among actors and contributed to the emergence of a more integrated territorial research ecosystem.

The third axis shifted the focus from institutional collaboration to residents' direct participation. Inhabitants were not approached as respondents or beneficiaries of participatory initiatives but as holders and producers of situated knowledge: participation was thus conceived not as a consultative exercise but as a research process through which everyday experiences, memories, and practices actively contributed to knowledge production and to the reinterpretation of territorial heritage.

Some 20 participatory workshops were organised across 6 secondary schools, the university, and several intergenerational settings, involving around 300 participants overall. The workshops were specifically designed to engage groups that are often underrepresented in heritage participation, particularly young people and working-class residents. Participants were recruited through three complementary channels, combined according to the target publics. Partnerships with libraries, museums, and local associations proved particularly effective for reaching working-class and socially underrepresented residents. Schools and the university facilitated the participation of younger publics, while open calls disseminated through different media enabled the organisation of intergenerational and general-public sessions. This diversified recruitment strategy reflected the plurality of publics targeted by the research rather than the application of a single sampling framework. Nevertheless, retired residents and individuals already engaged in local associative activities remained relatively overrepresented, reflecting their greater availability and willingness to participate.

The workshops themselves were deliberately differentiated rather than standardized. Their formats, duration, and facilitation were adapted to the objectives of each activity and to the publics involved. Some workshops consisted of single-day encounters; others extended over several weeks, as in the case of theatre. Several were organised jointly with artists and cultural mediators, thereby creating a direct articulation between participatory research and artistic co-production. Facilitation likewise varied according to the nature of each activity: sessions were led either by researchers, cultural mediators, or jointly, depending on the objectives pursued and the expertise required.

Data collection followed the same principle of methodological adaptation. Each workshop formed part of an ongoing research project and generated empirical material through a combination of written field notes, audio or video recordings, photographic documentation, and the archiving of participants' creative productions. The relative importance of these materials varied according to the workshop format: discussion-based sessions were more systematically documented through recordings and observation notes, whereas creative workshops privileged participants' productions – including texts, drawings, photographs, videos, performances, and design proposals – as primary research material.

Each workshop concluded with a form of public restitution adapted to its specific format. In some cases, participants collectively discussed preliminary analyses produced by the research team; in others, the public presentation of collectively created outputs became itself an opportunity for debate, reinterpretation, and circulation beyond the immediate research setting. Restitution therefore constituted not simply the dissemination of results but an additional stage of knowledge production through collective discussion.

Across these workshops, residents collectively produced narratives, memories, interpretations, and representations of their living environments. These contributions enriched institutional understandings of heritage and territorial development by documenting everyday practices and attachments that frequently remained absent from official representations. Resident participation thus functioned simultaneously as a research method, a source of empirical material, and a process through which alternative interpretations of the territory could emerge.

The fourth axis introduced a reflexive and critical layer through research-creation and artistic co-production. It builds on the creative-format workshops introduced in the third axis, approached here from the perspective of artistic co-production rather than resident participation.

Together with residents and researchers, the creative workshops involved around 15 artists, artistic collectives, and art educators working across creative writing, visual arts, theatre, music, and photography. Artistic production was conceived as a reflexive research tool and a site of investigation rather than merely a means of mediation. Photography workshops encouraged reflection on heritage attachments and territorial strategies, while visual arts, theatre, film-making, and creative writing workshops enabled participants to critically reinterpret local narratives and symbolic figures. Design workshops invited participants to reimagine spaces and everyday uses, whereas music composition workshops explored places through sound. Shared outputs—including texts, images, performances, and visual narratives—were collectively discussed during feedback sessions embedded throughout the workshops. These discussions encouraged critical reflection on processes of selection, visibility, and legitimation. Research-creation enabled participants to challenge dominant narratives and produce counter-narratives grounded in lived experience. By integrating creative production with analytical reflection, this methodological axis highlighted the symbolic and relational dimensions of everyday dwelling, contributing to the recognition of residents' experiential agency in the co-construction of territorial narratives.

Across these four axes, data collection, mediation, and participation were inseparable. As with the workshop restitutions described above, research results more broadly were regularly returned to and discussed in open public encounters, allowing analyses and accounts to circulate, be debated, and be collectively reinterpreted beyond the immediate research settings.

This combination of methods reflects a specific choice: everyday life was treated not only as an object to describe, but as a source of knowledge and a domain where residents actively intervene.

EVERYDAY PRACTICE AS A SITE OF TERRITORIAL REINTERPRETATION: BEYOND OFFICIAL REPRESENTATIONS

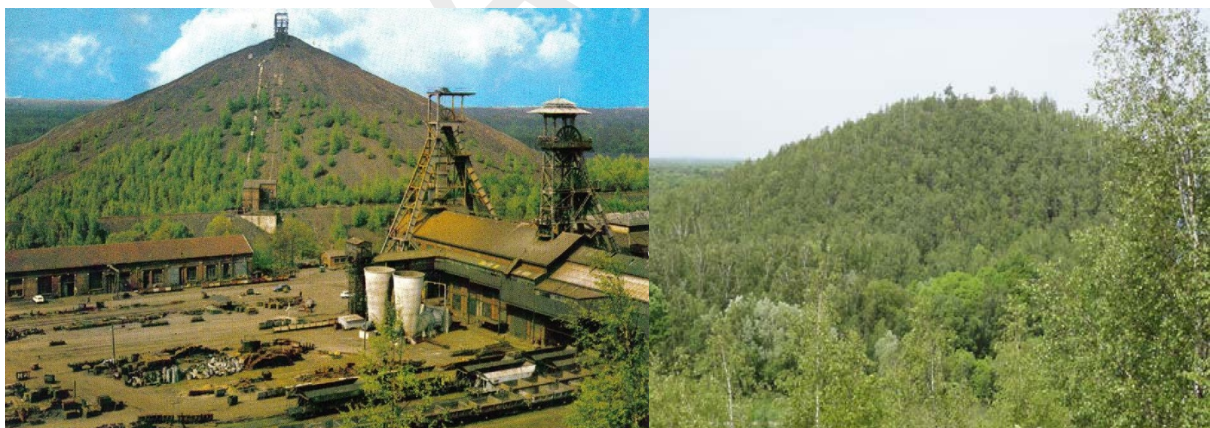


Figure 3 and 4: the Terril Sabatier, located in Raismes, in 1950 during the mining era, and today transformed into a public park (source: Wikipedia).

The first set of results focuses on everyday practices as sites of territorial attachment, showing how residents negotiate social and spatial realities, and exercise forms of agency alongside institutional representations. In La Porte du Hainaut, two illustrative cases – the *terrils* and the major mining sites – highlight these dynamics.

Terrils, the post-industrial spoil heaps characteristic of the region, demonstrate the gap between intended policy and actual practice (see Figures 3 and 4). Since the 1970s, *terrils* were formally developed as leisure spaces intended to provide affordable recreational opportunities for

populations with limited access to holidays. Yet our analysis shows that these intentions have not fully materialized: today, *terrils* are primarily frequented by more privileged social groups, while historically targeted working-class users are less visible. This divergence illustrates how formal policies coexist with everyday practices that reshape the intended use of space. Walking, jogging, or gathering on the *terrils* thus constitutes an embodied practice through which residents negotiate the physical and social landscape, while highlighting social inequalities in access and use and the interplay between inclusion, exclusion, and appropriation. This gap can be read through the capability approach (Sen 2001; Nussbaum 2011): formal access to a resource does not automatically translate into residents' effective capacity to use and appropriate it, a distinction often obscured in policy evaluations focused solely on infrastructure provision.

A second, contrasting dynamic emerged around the territory's major mining sites – the emblematic, UNESCO-listed heritage assets that anchor the region's official representations. Rather than rejecting mining heritage, they called for a broader appropriation of these sites beyond their current role as heritage attractions. What residents called for was not simply access, but reactivation – the possibility of reintegrating these sites into ordinary uses, rather than confining them to a musealized, visitor-oriented function.

The mining site of Wallers-Arenberg provides an illustrative example of this broader transformation. As observed in many former industrial sites, this one has been reconverted into a multifunctional space combining heritage valorisation, cultural activities, economic uses, and innovation-oriented functions. Today, Wallers-Arenberg hosts guided tours, conferences, business meetings, cultural events, as well as offices for start-ups and institutions, reflecting its role as a flagship heritage destination. At the same time, this model of valorisation raises the question of how such sites can remain connected to ordinary practices and the everyday life of neighbouring residents.

The inhabitants' demand for reactivation can be understood as an instance of social innovation in Moulaert's sense (Moulaert et al. 2005, 2007): residents did not merely request access but opened a new space of legitimacy around sites whose meanings and uses could be extended beyond institutional and visitor-oriented functions. This perspective was further explored through the student-led project competition, which proposed alternative scenarios for reconnecting Wallers-Arenberg with local everyday life, including initiatives such as flea markets and other forms of ordinary use.

The diagnosis also revealed a generational dimension to this tension: for younger residents without direct biographical ties to the mining past – those who did not personally experience the mines or have family memories directly attached to them – this heritage carries less immediate personal resonance, suggesting that the affective dimension of heritage attachment is closely tied to living memory and everyday life.

Together, the *terrils* and the major mining sites reveal that everyday practices are not peripheral but constitutive of territorial meaning. Across these two cases, residents reinterpret policies and heritage through everyday practices – whether by appropriating space differently than intended or by calling for the reintegration of officially recognized heritage into everyday life.

THE VIRTUAL ECOMUSEUM: RECOGNIZING EVERYDAY HERITAGES TO FOSTER COLLECTIVE ENGAGEMENT AND DIALOGUE

The second set of results examines how everyday practices and attachments can be translated into shared narratives and recognized publicly through participatory and digital dispositifs. A major outcome of the project is the *Ecomusée virtuel de La Porte du Hainaut*, co-constructed with residents to document and make visible everyday objects, modest collections, and local memories. The project involved workshops across schools, intergenerational settings, and local associations,

designed to gather oral histories, photographs, objects, and material traces of local life for digitalization and placement in the *Metaverse*. These workshops were not only about digitizing material, but also training participants unfamiliar with new technologies, creating moments of learning and collaborative experimentation.

Once the ecomuseum is online, a collaborative validation system inspired by *Wikipedia* will be implemented to ensure the scientific validity of the information while broadening the notion of heritage. Already at this stage, each contribution is traceable, open to discussion, and subject to collective review by researchers and participants.

This method combines experiential knowledge with academic frameworks, producing a co-constructed and credible knowledge base. Beyond guaranteeing reliability, the system also functions as a social mechanism of recognition, publicly acknowledging inhabitants as legitimate contributors to heritage-making and granting them authority over what counts as locally meaningful heritage. This can be read as a concrete mechanism of social innovation: the validation system does not merely produce content but creates a new arena of legitimacy from which residents had previously been excluded by more conventional, expert-driven processes. This approach significantly expanded the scope of what is considered heritage, including family collections, modest objects, everyday practices (including those of historically marginalized groups), and non-institutional cultural expressions often overlooked by institutions. This broadening enacts, rather than merely illustrates, the critical heritage studies claim that heritage is the outcome of processes of selection and legitimation, by actively redistributing who holds the power to select.

Through this process, the digital museum functions as a structuring tool for local memory, linking domestic, everyday, and public spheres by supporting intergenerational engagement and dialogue. It not only documents heritage but actively facilitates dialogue among residents, creating spaces where experiences, memories, and perspectives are exchanged and negotiated. It also provides a basis not only for cultural valorisation but also for research and teaching, creating resources—such as 3D digitalized objects complemented by technical sheets and testimonies—that go beyond documentation to foster knowledge co-production. These resources can be updated, expanded, and continuously integrated as new contributions and insights emerge.

This participatory and technological approach is not without limitations. Because it is neither technically nor financially feasible to digitize every object proposed by participants, the Chair's researchers developed a protocol to ensure that the selection of objects for digitization reflects both the plurality of the territory's heritage and objective prioritization criteria, such as an object's condition, rarity, and vulnerability (Boukadi et al. 2025). Three-dimensional digitization requires substantial financial resources, specialized equipment, technical expertise, data processing, and long-term digital preservation, making some form of selection unavoidable. At the current stage of the project, however, the volume of material remains manageable, and the principal challenge lies elsewhere. Contributions to the ecomuseum rely on voluntary engagement, which structurally shapes what enters the platform and what remains absent from it. As in the workshops discussed above, certain groups – notably those with limited time availability or pre-existing trust in institutional or associative networks – proved harder to reach and mobilize than others, producing a corpus that is necessarily fragmentary and unevenly representative of the territory's diversity, rather than a comprehensive record of local heritage. This fragmentation is a structural feature of any participatory heritage device: the ecomuseum documents what residents chose, and were able, to contribute – not the totality of local memory. Recognizing this limitation is itself consistent with the critical heritage studies framework mobilized throughout this article: the platform does not escape the logic of selection it seeks to challenge, but relocates the site of selection from institutional experts to a broader, though still partial and uneven, set of contributors.

A further, related question concerns the museographic coherence of the collection as it grows. At this stage, the number of documented objects remains limited, and the priority has been to valorise each contribution rather than to select or hierarchize among them – a choice consistent with the platform's participatory logic. This nonetheless raises a distinct challenge for the future: how to

articulate an accumulative, participatory logic of collection with the demands of coherent museological narration, once the corpus grows large enough to require curatorial choices about display, sequencing, and interpretation. Unlike a conventional museum, where selection precedes exhibition, the ecomuseum inverts this order – accumulation comes first, coherence must be constructed afterward – and how this tension will be resolved as the collection expands remains an open question for the project's future development.

PLURALIZING TERRITORIAL REPRESENTATIONS AND COUNTER-NARRATIVES

The third set of results highlights how dominant territorial representations can be challenged and pluralized through counter-narratives. It examines how historical texts, folkloric figures, and contemporary practices – especially those of women and marginalized groups – can be inserted within participatory processes to produce more inclusive and socially grounded understandings of heritage. Historically, dominant narratives framed the mining territory as white, national, and masculine, marginalizing women, migrants, and other groups. Disseminated through institutional histories, cultural representations, and heritage practices, these narratives have shaped an idealized and homogeneous vision of mining identity while rendering many actors and experiences invisible. Women were largely confined to supporting roles, while the presence of certain migrant communities—particularly African populations—remained largely absent.

A major outcome of the project lies in the production of counter-narratives that question and reframe these representations. Research on women's representations and voices began with the *Cantilène de Sainte Eulalie* (880), the earliest known text written in French in a local abbey, as an early example of the literary construction of feminine heroism. In this foundational narrative, Eulalie embodies spiritual courage and moral resistance, yet within a framework that associates femininity with sanctity, sacrifice, and martyrdom. Rather than limiting the analysis to this inherited model, the project sought to explore how such a figure might be reinterpreted and revalorized today in the light of contemporary debate on gender and agency.

From this early symbolic construction of womanhood, the research extended to local women writers and intellectual figures whose trajectories, although historically documented, have remained largely absent from territorial memory. Conducted in partnership with the *Maison Louise de Bettignies*, a museum dedicated to the wartime resistance figure Louise de Bettignies and a center supporting women facing violence, the project uncovered and disseminated knowledge about figures such as the Beguine Marguerite Porete, Louise d'Épinay, Mademoiselle de Clairon, and Jacqueline Debatte. While these women contributed to literary and cultural life, their presence has not been integrated into dominant representations of the territory. By moving from canonical literary representation to overlooked local biographies, the project exposed a structural asymmetry in heritage construction: women may be present as symbolic figures within cultural traditions, yet absent as historical agents in territorial narratives.

Rather than treating this asymmetry as a purely historiographical issue, the project translated its findings into participatory heritage practices through public lectures, school workshops, and exhibitions encompassing local artists, teachers and museum curators, that reintroduced these women as historical agents within collective memory. Through these activities, the project also examined and challenged the mechanisms through which collective memory is constructed, including the selective formation of local canons and the privileging of industrial and masculine-coded narratives. In doing so, it extends critical heritage studies' analysis of selection and legitimation (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998), showing how participatory heritage-making can reshape recognition by reopening territorial memory to overlooked figures and expanding the conditions of recognition and affiliation identified by Nussbaum (2011) as central to a dignified and socially embedded life.

This same logic of deconstruction-as-restitution extends beyond historical figures to the contemporary associative fabric of the territory. In parallel, the project documented contemporary forms of territorial dynamization led by women, including migrant women actively involved in associations and cultural initiatives such as *Main dans la main* and *Nouveau regard*, whose missions are to break isolation and maintain local solidarities through activities such as workshops, convivial encounters and community labs. Collaboration with these associations sought to make visible how everyday activities carried out by women constitute forms of civic contribution rather than naturalized extensions of feminine care. By questioning the historical processes through which activities such as leading sewing workshops or organizing neighborhood meals have been coded as “natural” rather than recognized as work and civic engagement, the project transformed critical analysis into a lever for institutional recognition and present-day change.

While the previous examples focused on recovering marginalized voices and expanding the field of heritage recognition, the case of the folkloric figure of the poet and miner Jules Mousseron reveals another dimension of heritage pluralization: the critical reopening of figures that have already been canonized. Jules Mousseron was critically recontextualized through archival research, master's theses, public debates, and participatory theatrical workshops. Rather than treating Mousseron as an unquestioned icon of mining culture, the project critically recontextualized his figure through archival research, public debates, and participatory theatrical workshops. It questioned the heroic and fatalistic portrayal of the miner conveyed through his work, a representation that tended to naturalize hardship and resonate with the paternalistic narratives promoted by mining companies. This reassessment did not seek to erase or discredit his contribution, but to situate him within his historical context and place his figure in dialogue with other, less visible narratives of the territory. This case extends critical heritage studies' analysis of heritage-making (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998) by showing that heritage selection operates not only through exclusion, but also through the stabilization of particular figures and interpretations as representative of a territory. By reopening such representations to historical and social complexity, the project contributed to a more plural and reflexive understanding of mining heritage.

By connecting historical texts, folkloric figures, and contemporary practices, the project demonstrates that heritage is not a fixed legacy but an ongoing process of recognition and negotiation, shaped both by the recovery of overlooked narratives and the reinterpretation of established ones.

FROM INTIMATE DWELLING TO POLITICAL DWELLING: STRENGTHENING SOCIAL BONDS AND SYMBOLIC RECOGNITION

Extending from recognition of everyday heritage and pluralization of representations, a final set of results highlights how everyday dwelling practices can extend beyond personal experiences into forms of collective engagement, grounded in a project-based understanding of community. This project-based, non-essentialist understanding of collective belonging directly addresses Blackstock's (2005) critique of community-based approaches: rather than assuming a pre-existing, homogeneous community, the results show collective identity emerging through shared projects, practices, and responsibilities – a processual, rather than given, form of community.

The transition from intimate to political dwelling does not imply a move away from everyday life, but rather the recognition that ordinary practices, attachments, and forms of care can become resources for collective action when they are shared and made visible. Through participatory workshops, research-creation activities, laboratories, and debates, residents gained the capacity to intervene in dominant representations, challenge established narratives, and collectively negotiate what is considered meaningful, valuable, or worthy of transmission within the territory. These processes transformed personal attachments to places, objects, and memories into shared

references, enabling participants to enact forms of co-responsibility for the material, symbolic, and social dimensions of the territory. Dwelling thus emerged not only as a way of inhabiting space, but as a practice through which collective meanings and forms of civic engagement are produced. This process connected individuals across social, generational, and cultural boundaries while creating conditions for new forms of recognition and agency. Rather than relying on predefined categories of belonging, it enabled residents to strengthen their capacity to contribute to how their living environment is interpreted and valued. Taken together, these forms of engagement illustrate what Sen (2001) describes as the expansion of real freedoms to act. However, this process should not be understood as eliminating existing inequalities in access to participation: recognition remains shaped by who participates, whose voices are heard, and whose experiences become visible.

REFLECTIONS ON TRANSFERABILITY OF THE APPROACH AND ITS CONSTRAINTS

Through its empirical findings, this article contributes to the literature on social innovation, the capability approach, and critical heritage studies, while proposing a rethinking of tourism as a secondary outcome of territorial transformation. This perspective contrasts with much of the literature, which – even in its more critical or participatory variants – tends to consider tourism as a distinct policy domain and a driver of transformation. In the Chair's approach, tourism, when it emerges, is a consequence of broader processes of collective capacity-building and heritage redefinition rather than their starting point.

The findings support the idea that territorial reconversion depends not only on inhabitants' capacity to influence the transformation of their everyday living environments, but first on their ability to intervene at the level of institutional representations – often taken for granted – through which territories and their heritage values are defined. Moreover, the Chair's initiatives offer a way to operationalize theoretical concepts: where social innovation theory and the capability approach describe collective capacity-building in general terms, and critical heritage studies offer a largely deconstructive account of how heritage is selectively produced, this research shows how these two dimensions – the capacity to act collectively and the capacity to reshape heritage representations – can operate together in practice.

Taken together, these results suggest that the approach developed within the Chair extends beyond the specific case studied. By focusing on situated forms of engagement and project-based social dynamics, it offers an adaptable framework for European contexts marked by similar tensions between heritage policies, territorial narratives, and everyday modes of inhabiting. Rather than relying on predefined participatory models, it frames public action as a process of co-production that is experimental and context-sensitive, through which residents contribute to shaping collective meanings, uses, and future trajectories of their territories.

Such orientations increasingly resonate at the European level, where culture is progressively understood as embedded in everyday life and daily practices rather than confined to institutional or monumental heritage. In the field of tourism and heritage valorisation, this shift can be observed in initiatives such as the European union's *Culture Compass for Europe* and its operationalisation through the programme *Culture in Cities and Regions*, as well as through European Capital of Culture projects. For example, *Leeuwarden 2018* placed neighbourhood initiatives, local storytelling, and small-scale participatory cultural actions at the core of its programme. Similarly, *Molenbeek 2030*, although not ultimately selected as European Capital of Culture, has emphasized community-led assemblies and co-creation workshops that highlight residents' daily routines and local cultural practices.

While these initiatives demonstrate the growing recognition of participatory and everyday-oriented cultural policies, the Chair's approach distinguishes itself through the articulation of tourism and

heritage valorisation with a structured, research-driven methodology. By combining empirical observation, participatory workshops, and creative production, it does not only mobilise residents' involvement but also produces situated knowledge and critically interrogates the symbolic and material dimensions of everyday life.

These contributions must, however, be considered alongside a set of critical constraints that limit both their scope and durability. Participation within the project is largely based on voluntary involvement, introducing forms of self-selection that inevitably shaped who took part and whose practices became visible. More broadly, the dynamics observed are embedded in multiple, often misaligned temporalities. The rhythms of research, political decision-making, institutional procedures, and everyday life rarely coincide, creating tensions between actors as well as moments of intensive collective engagement and phases of inertia or discontinuity. In particular, a tension emerged between the short-term temporality of events—such as workshops and research-creation activities—and the long-term temporality required to sustain implementation processes over time. Moreover, actors' interests are not always aligned, generating tensions. Differing objectives are evident: for instance, a tourist office prioritizes tangible, visible results that can be quickly communicated or acted upon, whereas researchers focus on capturing nuances and complexities. Tensions in appropriation also emerged: some associations are cautious about participating, fearing that their work could be politically instrumentalized. In addition, the critical nature of the research can create tension or discomfort for actors whose practices or decisions are questioned: public authorities or institutions may not welcome critiques of their actions. Given the different weight and power of all the actors involved, including the ability to provide or withhold funding, such tensions can introduce bias.

In addition, the maintenance of participatory spaces, collaborative platforms, and shared processes requires significant material, organisational, and human resources. Keeping such spaces open—both physically and symbolically—demands ongoing mediation, facilitation, and institutional support. Without sustained commitment, there is a risk that these initiatives remain confined to the duration of a project limiting their capacity to produce lasting transformations. These constraints underline that approaches grounded in everyday practices and collective engagement are neither spontaneous nor self-sustaining; they rely on fragile assemblages of actors, resources, and temporal alignments, revealing both their potential and their vulnerability within contemporary territorial contexts.

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