# Digital enjoyment and local identity: an integrated pathway for psychophysical well-being



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Abstract. This research investigates innovative strategies and presents experimental insights to enhance cultural and landscape identity through the integrated design of naturalistic paths and digital tools, such as UAS and Virtual Tours. The objective is to develop a holistic model of cultural engagement that combines on-site physical experiences, immersion in nature, and in-depth knowledge acquisition. Particular attention is given to the exploration of distinctive decorative elements, such as ornamental motifs found on elevated architectural structures, which are often difficult to access. The proposed model, exemplified through its application to the Amalfi Coast, serves as an adaptable framework for the sustainable value enhancement of other territorial contexts with similar landscape and cultural characteristics.

Keywords: Identity; Natural pathways; Psychophysical well-being; Amalfi coast; Interlaced arches.

## Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing focus on innovative design projects aimed at enhancing territorial Heritage Identity. These initiatives are not only intended to promote individual and collective well-being but also to preserve the cultural and historical identity of places. This approach often involves the application of digitisation processes leveraging advanced technologies for data acquisition and communication. Such tools make it possible to virtually access otherwise inaccessible or difficult-to-reach locations, thereby expanding opportunities for cultural and environmental connectivity.

This study aims to explore two main directions. Firstly, it examines the integration of digital technologies with natural environments to redefine how these spaces are experienced, while simultaneously fostering an understanding of local identities and encouraging new lifestyles rooted in a renewed harmony between individuals and the natural world. Secondly, it emphasises the adoption of slow and immersive practices, such as wellness walks, which foster meaningful connections and contribute to psychophysical well-being.

The Amalfi Coast, with its unique blend of natural landscapes and historical architecture, serves as an ideal case study for these reflections. It stands as a quintessential example of Heritage Identity, characterised by distinctive decorative motifs located at the top of architectural elements such as bell towers and apses, which are often challenging to observe in detail from the ground (Fig. 1).

To overcome this limitation, this research advocates for the use of non-invasive digital technologies, such as Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS), to capture detailed, spherical images and three-dimensional data.

The integration of cultural acquisition with psychophysical well-being is concretised through the design of a virtual tour along a specially curated route. This tour aims to offer participants a comprehensive cultural and natural immersion experience, demonstrating a replicable model for the sustainable enhancement of other regions with similar cultural and environmental characteristics.

The use of these technologies prompts additional considerations regarding the remote accessibility of such cultural assets. By addressing physical barriers, it broadens the concept of accessibility through a mutual exchange of perceptions between the real and the virtual. For example, this could involve installing fixed optical sensors in architecturally or environmentally significant locations. These sensors could reproduce real-time, immediate, *hinc et nunc*, perceptions of the surroundings and/or intricate details.

Such multidimensional approaches not only enhance the understanding of the hidden details of local heritage but also strengthen the emotional connection to the territory. Participants, often unaware of the rich cultural and natural assets surrounding them, can uncover new meanings and deepen their sense of belonging. This fosters more responsible and attentive behaviours towards the conservation of heritage.

Hence, a return to nature not only provides a refuge from the alienation and hectic pace of contemporary Western lifestyles but also serves as an educational tool. It raises awareness of sustainable actions essential for safeguarding our species and the planet.

## Wellness paths for the knowledge and enhancement of territorial identity: state of the art

It is plausible to assert that contemporary society's disconnection from the natural world has its roots in a gradual historical process, which intensified during specific periods and likely peaked in the 20th century. During this era, urbanisation accelerated significantly, and the advent of advanced technologies progressively diminished the necessity for direct interaction with nature in the performance of daily activities. In this context, the increased consumption of natural resources was accompanied by a growing detachment from their origins, fostering a perception of nature as something extraneous and irrelevant to human existence.

This growing alienation from the natural environment, coupled with the tendency to spend most of one's life in enclosed, sterile, and unstimulating spaces, has led to a loss of cultural connection with the surrounding territory and serious repercussions on mental and physical health. This phenomenon, termed "nature-deficit disorder" (Louv, 2005), transcends individual discomfort, carrying profound implications at a societal level.

In response to this situation, the necessity of re-establishing an



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01 | Geolocation of Intertwined Arch Architecture in the Amalfi Coast, elaboration by R. Iaderosa and M. Cicala

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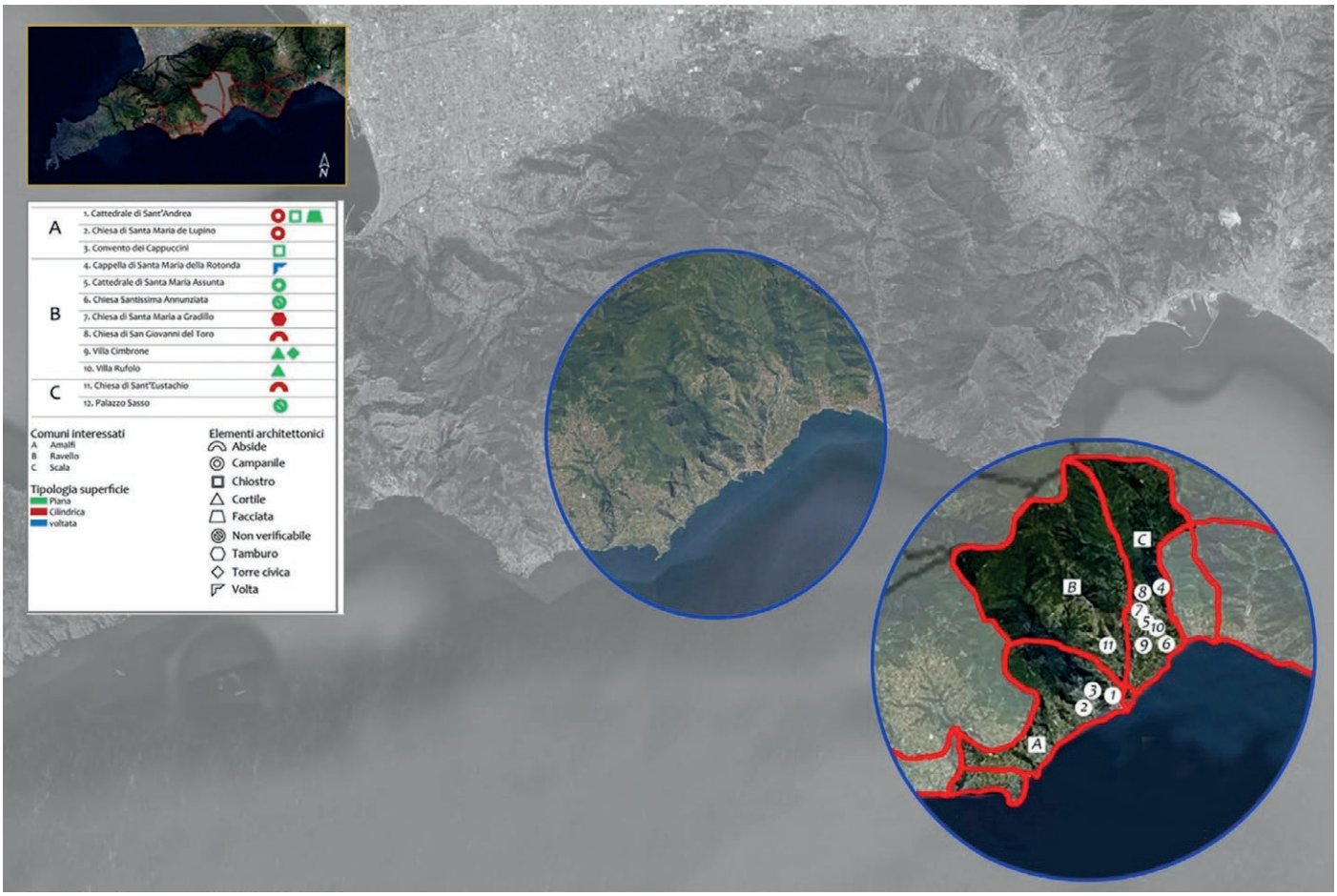


authentic connection with nature emerges not only as a matter of personal well-being (Wilson, 1984) but also as a response to a broader global ecological crisis. Returning to nature entails rediscovering an ancestral bond with the environment and fostering a renewed sense of empathy toward it, an essential prerequisite for adopting sustainable behaviours and promoting the rediscovery and appreciation of local territories.

Forest Therapy, a practice originating in Japan under the name *Shinrin-Yoku* (forest bathing), exemplifies how a return to nature can be systematically organised to maximise its benefits (Bradley, 2018; Yoshifumi, 2018; Felber, 2020). Originally designed to enhance physical and mental health through mindful immersion in forested environments, this practice has inspired similar approaches in various global contexts. In Europe, such practices have been further enriched to include educational pathways, knowledge-sharing experiences, and interactive methodologies. A notable example is Italy's educational forests, which merge sensory experiences with activities aimed at teaching biodiversity and environmental sustainability. Similarly, the UK's *Nature Connection* programmes integrate individual well-being with cultural and environmental understanding of the landscape (Richardson *et al.*, 2015; Lumber *et al.*, 2017). These approaches extend beyond immersive natural experiences to structured, multidimensional pathways that promote a deeper understanding of the territory, its ecological uniqueness, and its cultural significance.

By combining well-being with knowledge, these initiatives bring participants closer to both the natural world and the complexity and richness of their surroundings. This fosters an emotional and intellectual bond that enhances awareness and empathy toward environmental stewardship.

At the European level, a distinguishing feature of these practices lies in their adaptability to diverse territorial contexts, emphasising local peculiarities. Nature walks offer participants a unique opportunity to broaden their awareness by engaging with new perspectives and deepening their understanding of

02 | Synthesis Image of the Multimedia Communication of the Study Research, elaboration by R. Iaderosa and M. Cicala

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familiar places. The educational component of these pathways is equally significant, as it promotes ecological values and encourages sustainable behaviours, laying the foundation for a more mindful and respectful relationship between individuals and the environment (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989).

However, to ensure that the reconnection process with nature is genuinely effective, it is essential to base it on well-defined protocols. These protocols should combine sensory stimuli, opportunities for personal and communal reflection, and cultural insights into the locations traversed. The absence of a clear methodology risks not only diminishing the psychophysical benefits but also undermining the broader goal of fostering knowledge and safeguarding the territory.

The potential of such practices has been significantly enhanced through transdisciplinary approaches and the integration of digital technologies. These innovations have extended the experience beyond the physical moment of the walk itself, offering new avenues for interaction and engagement with natural and cultural heritage.

The use of apps, online platforms, virtual tours, interactive maps, and multimedia content enables participants to access additional information about the sites they visit. Furthermore, it is essential to clarify that the long-term maintenance of these technological systems requires the development of an integrated management and updated strategy. This entails defining protocols for periodic monitoring of both hardware and software, as well as adopting modular and scalable solutions. Such solutions will enable the proposed model to be adapted to different territorial contexts, ensuring its replicability and continuous updating of the technologies in use, in line with technological advancements and local specificities.

While digital technologies have historically been associated with detachment from nature, contemporary scientific discourse has highlighted their potential to foster reconnection with it. From a psychophysical well-being perspective, research has shown that immersive and/or virtual experiences, when combined with physical presence in nature, can enhance the restorative effects of walks. This approach uniquely enriches the understanding of less visible elements of the landscape and local architecture.

For instance, integrated digital surveying techniques allow for the collection of extensive quantitative and qualitative data on architectural and natural features along pathways that are difficult or impossible to access physically. These data, processed using established or innovative methods, can be transformed into three-dimensional models and/or interactive representations accessible either on-site or remotely. This capability addresses the growing need for global accessibility, regardless of physical challenges or geographic distance from points of interest.

Well structured virtual tours that prioritise visual and sensory details, such as panoramic views, architectural highlights, and significant landscapes, could engage multiple senses, including hearing. However, replicating the full wellness experience remotely remains a challenge, underscoring the need for further exploration in future studies.

This study focuses on the opportunities that digital technologies provide for making complex and hard-to-access architectural elements, such as the ornamental patterns of intertwined arches in the Amalfi Coast, accessible and comprehensible (Fig. 2).

The concept of overlapping and interweaving circular elements, while reaching its peak in Islamic art and Maghreb-Hispanic culture, has roots in classical traditions. Specifically, the intersection of two circles passing through each other's centres forms the *vesica piscis*, or "mystical almond", a geometric figure imbued with spiritual and cosmological significance. This motif traverses epochs and cultures, evolving within diverse contexts. In Byzantine and Romanesque traditions, the intertwining of arches took on greater symbolic and figurative significance, extending from the decoration of objects to complex architectural surfaces. A quintessential example is the Great Mosque of Córdoba (784 CE), a hallmark of Islamic art in Spain, where interlaced arches merge structural and decorative functions. This integration creates a visual dynamism that conveys both solidity and lightness (Gámiz-Gordo *et al*., 2021; Cantizani Oliva *et al*., 2023

Over time, the architectural use of interwoven arches evolved from a structural element into a purely ornamental feature, characterised by a progressive fragmentation of form. This evolution culminated in the emergence of the lattice motif, where the intricate subdivision of geometric surfaces reflects the aesthetic progression of Islamic art. Architectural decoration in this style acquired a distinctly geometric character, exemplified in the stunning works along the Amalfi Coast.

Notable instances include the Cloister of Paradise in Amalfi (1266–1268) and the courtyard of Villa Rufolo in Ravello (late 13th century), where the interwoven arch motif achieves a harmonious balance between elegance and complexity. These examples illustrate the integration of cultural influences into a local architectural language, enhancing the heritage identity of the region.

Transposing this motif onto cylindrical or curved surfaces poses greater complexity, as the geometric structure must adapt to the volumetric peculiarities of the form. In such cases, the en-

gineering challenge intertwines with sophisticated aesthetics, resulting in unique configurations, such as the intricate interweaving found on the bell tower of the Amalfi Cathedral. The creation of such solutions demands an in-depth study of proportions and intersections, highlighting the intrinsic connection between art and mathematics that characterises the entire development of interlaced arches.

Furthermore, the ability of these interwoven arches to harmonise functionality with meaning makes them a central element of architectural heritage, worthy of further study and enhancement (Zerlenga, 2008). These structures, often concealed by dense natural surroundings or located in remote areas, present a challenge for direct observation. As a result, the use of technologies that enhance their accessibility and appreciation becomes essential, allowing these masterpieces to be more fully appreciated and understood in their historical and aesthetic contexts.

**Naturalistic and Digital Paths Between Nature and Culture: Enhancement and Accessibility of Intertwined Arches**

The Amalfi Coast, with its extraordinary synthesis of natural and cultural heritage (Zerlenga, 2006), serves as an ideal laboratory for the development of innovative territorial enhancement models. Recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage site, this region stands out for its harmonious integration of landscapes of natural beauty with architectural elements of priceless historical and artistic value, capable of evoking a deep contemplative and regenerative dimension.

In this context, the design of integrated routes that combine natural exploration with the conscious enjoyment of architectural heritage effectively addresses contemporary needs for accessibility and the promotion of psychophysical well-being (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989).

The immersive experience in the landscapes of the Coast, characterised by mountainous ridges, cultivated terraces, and panoramic sea views, stimulates documented benefits for human well-being, promoting relaxation, stress reduction, and a profound sense of connection with the natural environment. At the same time, the interaction with the architectural heritage, through the discovery of interwoven arches on curved surfaces, enriches the cultural experience. These arches, known for their geometric complexity and high symbolic value as evokers of universal concepts of harmony and order, become the focal point of an ongoing experimental study that combines tradition and innovation.

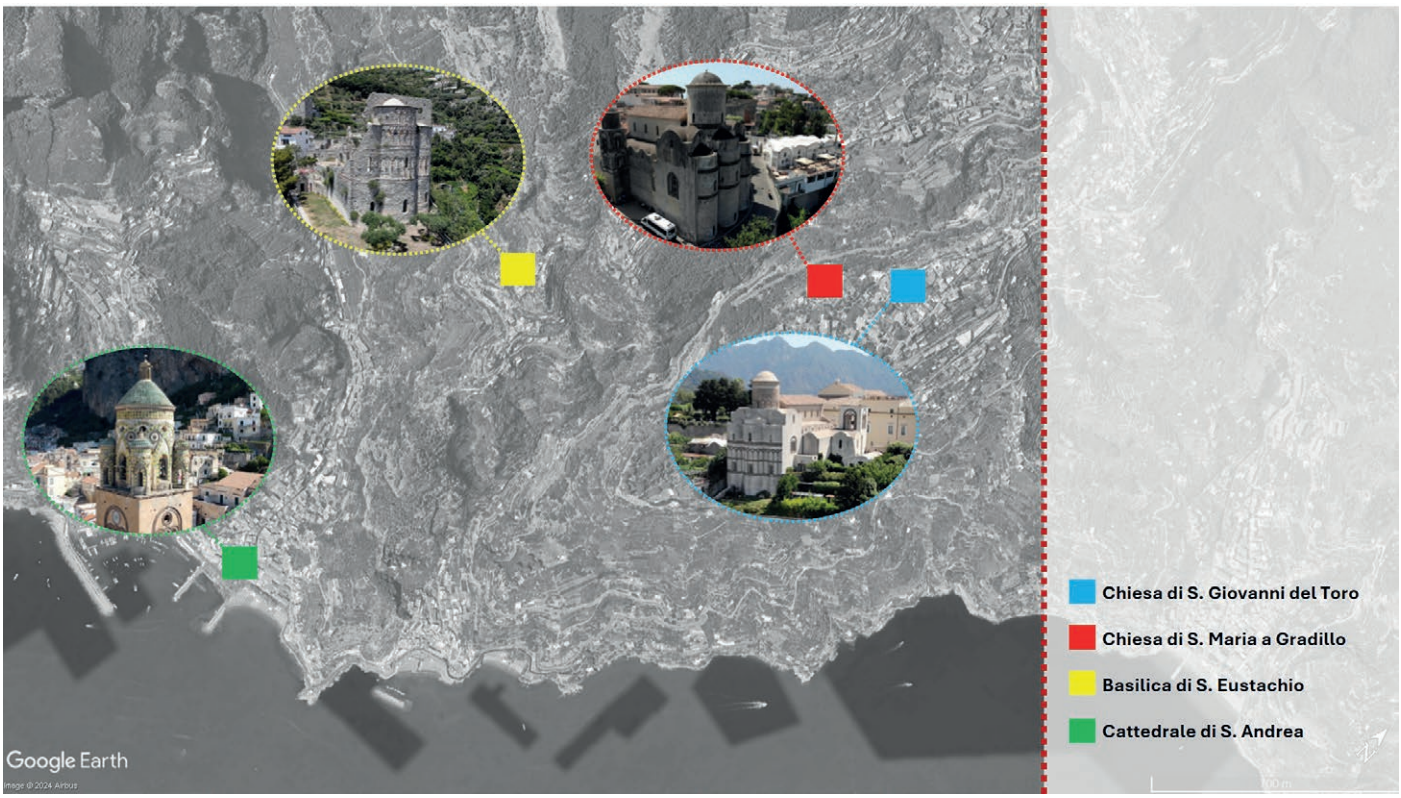
Often located in elevated or remote positions such as bell towers, apses, and drums, the interwoven arches have limited physical accessibility, necessitating the adoption of an interdisciplinary and technological approach. Their enhancement requires not only the use of advanced methods for knowledge acquisition, such as digital remote surveying via aircraft (Galasso and La Placa, 2020), but also the design of experiential strategies that stimulate psychophysical well-being through movement, contact with nature, and cultural enrichment. This dialogue between physical and virtual experiences not only facilitates access to cultural heritage but also contributes to creating a holistic dimension of well-being, where aesthetic contemplation and personal regeneration intertwine.

The proposed study suggests a structured itinerary connecting four iconic sites on the Amalfi Coast, namely the cylindrical drum of the Church of Santa Maria a Gradillo, the apse of the Church of San Giovanni del Toro, the ruins of the Basilica of Sant'Eustachio, and the bell tower of the Cathedral of Sant'Andrea (Fig. 3). Each site has been carefully selected not only for the historical and artistic significance of the interwoven arches that define it but also as the representation of a harmonious interaction between cultural heritage and the surrounding natural context. This itinerary follows existing natural trails, offering unique panoramic views of the Mediterranean, where different cultures have produced architecture characterised by different typological and aesthetic models (Clévenot and Degeorge, 2000), immersed in the scents and sounds of the Mediterranean scrub. These paths not only foster a deep connection with the natural environment, with documented beneficial effects on psychophysical well-being, but also allow for the rediscovery of the architectural richness of the territory through an enriching and inclusive cultural experience.

The first stop on the itinerary leads to the Church of Santa Maria a Gradillo, located in the historic centre of Ravello, at an altitude of about 365 metres above sea level. The cylindrical drum of the church stands out for its interwoven arches arranged in a rotational symmetry of order eight, representing a prominent example of medieval decorative art. The arches, characterised by intersecting skewed curves, create a visual effect of dynamic continuity, symbolically evoking the concepts of cyclical cosmic harmony. This geometric complexity is not incidental but reflects careful design based on harmonic proportions and mathematical models typical of medieval architecture, linking aesthetic and symbolic dimensions.

The second stop is at the Church of San Giovanni del Toro, also in Ravello, located at about 380 metres above sea level. The triple apse of this structure is embellished with two-tone interwoven arches made by alternating yellow and grey tufa blocks in a carefully calibrated sequence. This bichrome pattern not only enhances the perception of depth and movement but also highlights the close correlation between form and function, giving the arches an aesthetic and symbolic value that transcends mere decoration. The harmonious curves of the arches, perfectly in-

03 | Identification and Graphic Visualization of the Architectural Foci Along the Path, elaboration by R. Iaderosa and M. Cicala

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tegrated with the apse structure, direct the gaze upward in an ascendant movement symbolising spiritual aspiration.

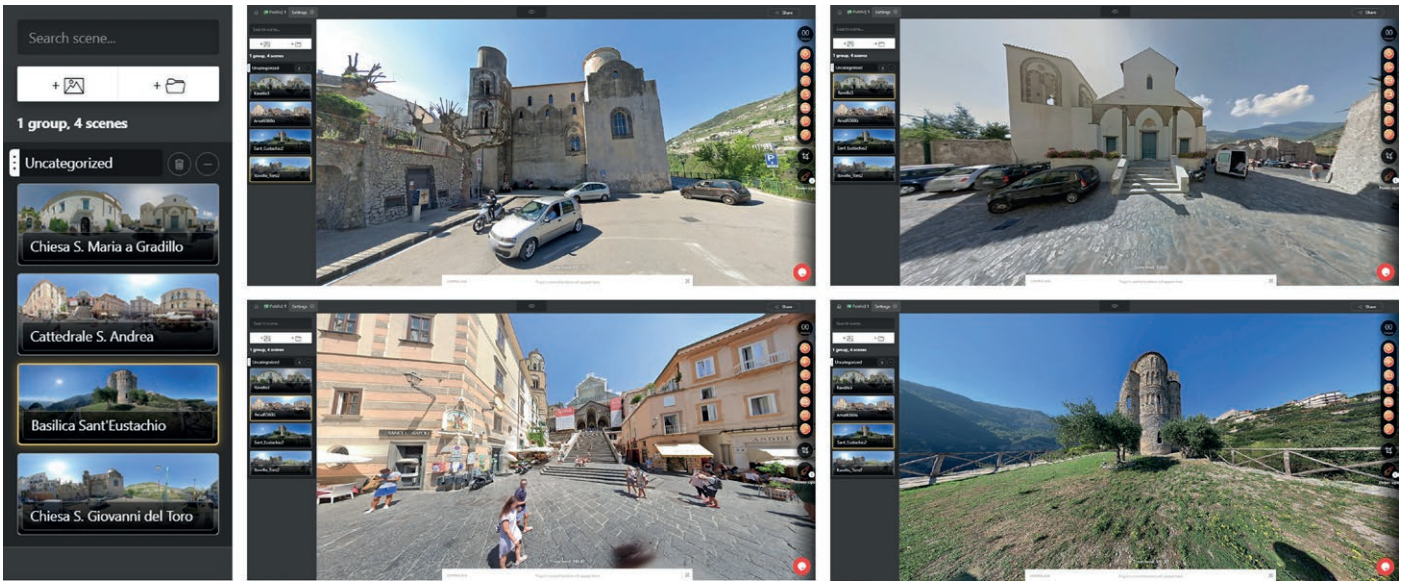
The third stop is at the ruins of the Basilica of Sant'Eustachio, in the town of Scala, at about 580 metres above sea level, the highest point of the route. The triple apse of the basilica is adorned with interwoven arches enriched by bichrome inlays that emphasise the complex geometries of the arches through a studied chromatic contrast. The arches, conceived as an integral part of the structure and not merely as ornaments, embody a symbolic meaning related to the concept of interconnection between cultural and natural elements. The precision of the geometric configurations testifies to the high technical and theoretical level reached, capable of translating mathematical and symbolic principles into architectural forms.

The final stop leads to the bell tower of the Cathedral of Sant'Andrea in Amalfi, located about 20 metres above sea level. The interwoven arches of the uppermost order of the bell tower are enhanced with polychrome maiolica in green and yellow, reflecting a synthesis of Eastern and Romanesque stylistic influences. The rhythmic arrangement of the maiolica and the complexity of the skewed curves of the arches create a decorative motif that symbolically evokes the eight point star, a cosmic representation of universal order and harmony. This bell tower stands out not only as an architectural symbol of the city but also as a masterpiece of balance between decoration, structure, and spiritual meaning.

The study of these architectural elements required the use of indirect surveying techniques for their documentation, driven by several methodological and practical considerations. The interwoven arches are often located in elevated and difficult-to-access positions, such as on drums, apses, and the upper orders of bell towers. Their geometric complexity and the delicacy of the decorations necessitated an approach that would avoid invasive interventions, which could potentially damage the historical structures or the surrounding landscape. The use of digital photogrammetry played a crucial role in generating high resolution three-dimensional digital models, capturing geometric, chromatic, and material details with a level of precision unattainable through traditional techniques (Fig. 4).

This approach not only enabled faithful documentation of the current state of the structures but also allowed for the analysis, through geometric reconstructions, of the proportions and relationships underlying the design of both planar and skewed interwoven arches (Zerlenga *et al.* 2022), which are characterised by their decorative motifs closely bound to the surface on which they lie (in the case of the curved type studied) (Migliari, 2003;

04 | GUI of the Virtual Tour – Lapentor software, , elaboration by R. Iaderosa and M. Cicala




Sgrosso, 1996), as well as the rhythm regulated by symmetries of different geometric natures (translatory and/or rotational) (Weyl, 1962).

This phase of knowledge and reconstruction will be integrated along the naturalistic paths connecting the sites of interest via a network of stations equipped with QR codes, designed to provide immediate access to high definition multimedia content, including detailed 3D models and interactive virtual tours. This technological solution aims to complement the exploratory experience on-site with advanced digital tools, enabling an experience that transcends the limits of direct perception and offers an in-depth analysis of the architectural and decorative components. Visitors will be able to explore geometric and material details, often not visible to the naked eye, in a context that combines scientific rigor with educational outreach. This approach represents an innovative model for heritage enhancement, capable of enhancing knowledge and accessibility through a synergy between physical and digital experiences (Figs 5, 6).

In conclusion, the adoption of indirect surveying techniques not only preserves the integrity of historical sites but also expands the possibilities for access and enjoyment of heritage. The digital documentation produced serves as an essential resource for research, and helps overcome physical barriers, ensuring inclusive access, even remotely. This approach fits within a model of sustainable enhancement, where technology is not merely an operational tool but becomes a means to foster continuous dialogue between individuals, architecture, and landscape.

From an educational standpoint, this interdisciplinary approach provides an effective platform for the dissemination and awareness of heritage. The combination of physical and digital exploration helps preserve the integrity of places, while expanding the opportunities for interaction. Furthermore, remote accessibility democratises the experience, making it available even to those who cannot physically reach the sites. This strategy highlights digital technologies as crucial tools for promoting widespread knowledge and shared responsibility toward heritage.

The intertwined arches of the Amalfi Coast, symbols of a dialogue between tradition and innovation, assume a new role in contemporary cultural narratives. This model, integrating physical movement, knowledge, and well-being, addresses the needs of responsible tourism, aimed at reducing environmental impact (overtourism) while maximising social and cultural benefits. Furthermore, the interdisciplinary approach adopted for enhancing the intertwined arches serves as an adaptable model of excellence in the fields of cultural and landscape sustainability, laying a solid foundation for future applications in similar contexts.

## Conclusions

This study explored the potential of an integrated approach that combines advanced digital technologies with naturalistic paths aimed at enhancing landscape and cultural heritage. The intertwined arches of the Amalfi Coast, expressions of a decorative tradition blending Byzantine, Islamic, and Romanesque influences, are at the core of an analysis that highlights not only their historical and artistic value but also their role as mediators in a new relationship between culture, nature, and well-being.

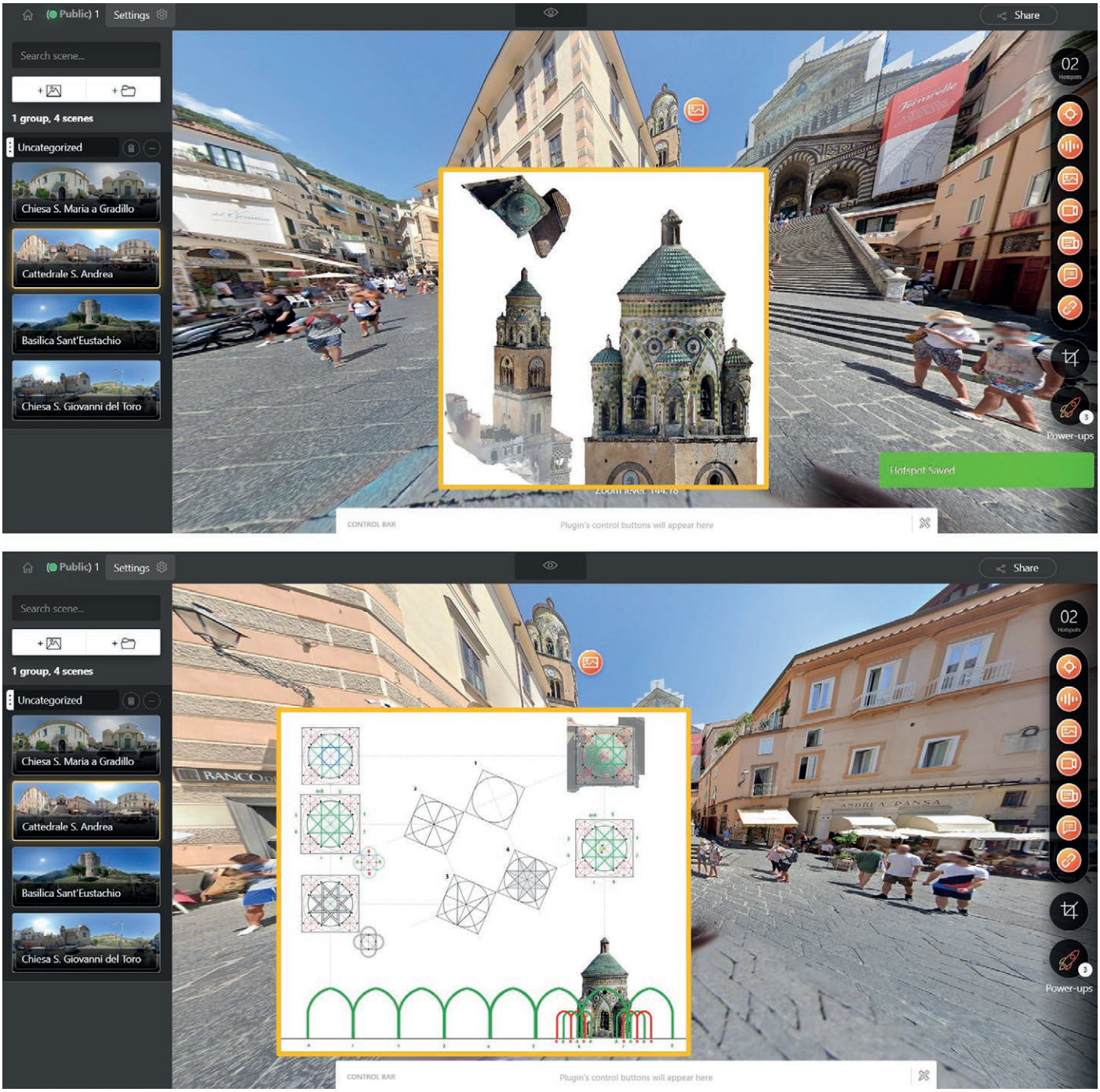
05 | GUI of the Virtual Tour – Basilica of Sant'Eustachio in Scala (SA). Image hotspot: a) textured polygonal model; b) study and geometric analysis of the ornamental motif, elaboration by R. laderosa and M. Cicala




Their digital representation, integrated into the design of itineraries connecting sites of great landscape and cultural significance, allowed the development of an experiential model capable of addressing contemporary needs for accessibility, sustainability, and inclusiveness. Walking along the paths of the Coast, immersed in Mediterranean landscapes, the scents of the Mediterranean scrub and the sound of the sea stimulates a sense of psycho-physical regeneration.

This effect has been further enhanced by the ability to access three-dimensional models and virtual tours of the intertwined arches, made available through strategically placed QR codes along the pathways. This process aims to demonstrate that the enhancement of cultural heritage should not be limited to mere material preservation but should also include contemporary narratives capable of fostering dynamic interaction with the public.

06 | GUI of the Virtual Tour – Cathedral of Sant'Andrea in Amalfi (SA). Image hotspot: a) textured polygonal model; b) study and geometric analysis of the ornamental motif, elaboration by R. Iaderosa and M. Cicala




Although the experimentation has already sparked interest among residents and tourists, providing initial qualitative insights into their engagement, a systematic data collection has not yet been conducted. To deepen the analysis of the impact of this initiative, the next phase of the research will include the administration of a specifically designed questionnaire. This tool will allow for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data on public perceptions, usage patterns, and levels of engagement, contributing to validating the effectiveness of integrating physical experiences with digital tools in cultural heritage enhancement.

Indeed, it is believed that adopting a participatory approach, supported by a solid empirical data foundation, is essential for developing replicable models in other cultural and landscape contexts. From this perspective, the digital representation of the intertwined arches of the Amalfi Coast is not merely a virtual

transposition but holds a symbolic value of sustainability and regeneration. It promotes harmonious interaction between tradition and innovation, outlining potential developments for future approaches to the enjoyment and preservation of cultural heritage.

## ATTRIBUTION, ACKNOWLEDGMENTS, COPYRIGHT

The chapters *Introduction* and *Conclusions* were written by Ornella Zerlenga; chapter one *Wellness Paths for the Knowledge and Enhancement of Territorial Identity: State of the Art* was written by Rosina Iaderosa; chapter two *Naturalistic and Digital Paths Between Nature and Culture: Enhancement and Accessibility of Intertwined Arches* was written by Margherita Cicala. Images and sections not directly cited should be considered as equally created by the authors.

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