

# Situating culture: Exploring culture and creativity beyond the city

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(EDS.)



**IN  
SITU**

place-based innovation of  
cultural and creative industries  
in non-urban areas



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## FOREWORD

# Figuratively speaking: Mapping landscapes as storyscapes

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“Figuratively speaking.” The phrasing slips by almost unnoticed in Robert Tally Jr.’s (2018) account of how literary texts create spatial understanding. He notes that literary texts provide “enumerable examples of fictional ‘maps,’ filled with figural representations of real and imaginary places, which can be used by readers to orient themselves in their own lives and lived spaces.” He then claims that the “study of literature thus involves a kind of history, theory, and analysis of cartography, *figuratively speaking*, as scholars may chart the development of literary maps over time, come to understand the various ways in which these maps function in relation to others and to society and culture...” (p. 1, emphasis added). It sounds like a casual rhetorical qualifier, a throat-clearing “sort of” or “in a manner of speaking.” But what if we take the participial clause seriously, literally even, as pointing toward both an epistemological stance and a potential methodological practice? What if the most telling way to map culture, particularly in places marginalised by conventional metrics and urban-centric perspectives, is through practices that acknowledge and embrace the figurative work all cartography performs? What if figurative speaking signifies a meeting place for rendering lived and living experience alongside what can be counted, plotted, and inventoried?

Tally's focus is on reading and interpreting texts, yet he opens consideration of literary scholarship as offering new ways to understand and practice cartography, "figuratively speaking"; as offering something to say about how maps and mapping function in relation to society and culture. In this foreword I want to take up the challenge introduced in Chapter 1 of *Situating Culture*, to provide "[a] view from the edge...with its own clarity and insight," introducing the proposition drawn from literary and language studies that *figurative speaking* has potentially profound value for our understanding of the cartographic practices informing IN SITU's work, and, in turn, how cultures are represented and represent themselves in smaller places.

The volume you are about to read tells the stories of six ostensibly peripheral regions of Europe—the volcanic Azores archipelago rising from the mid-Atlantic; Galway and the west of Ireland where Connemara's quartzite peaks meet the ocean; Western Iceland's saga-laden landscapes; Valmiera County in Latvia with its river valleys and post-Soviet transitions; Šibenik-Knin County on Croatia's Adriatic coast; and the Finnish municipalities of Rauma and Eurajoki, where wooden architecture and nuclear infrastructure coexist. As the opening chapter describes, these are "places that lie beyond the metropolitan spotlight, often figuratively and literally at the margins of Europe." Yet an informing premise of the book holds that culture in these so-called peripheral regions is not marginal but elemental, a foundation already present, replete with distinct cultural ecologies shaped by geography, history, creative capacity, and community engagement. Understanding such foundations requires a kind of cartographic bilingualism, which is to say, fluency in both literal mapping and figural mapping. With the help of IN SITU's innovative Lab model, these regions employ a cartographic practice that works across literal and figural registers simultaneously, producing representations that help communities orient themselves in terms of their own lives and lived spaces.

This volume thus presents something more than a series of regional case studies. It is as I see it an experiment in cultural mapping as a narrative art, grounded in the recognition that, as the volume reminds us, “The landscape is a storyscape. The feedback and connection between the two is a constant pulse.” As a methodological principle, cultural mapping must render this pulse between the physical and the narrative, between documented conditions and collective imaginaries, between the actual and the aspirational.

The IN SITU Labs do this through a dual practice: they generate thorough inventories of creative and cultural industries using standardised classifications (NACE codes, employment data, institutional counts) whilst engaging communities in participatory mapping exercises that facilitate a surfacing of emotional geographies, mythic attachments, remembered histories, and aspirational futures. Neither register is adequate by itself. The stories, if presented as unconnected to the economic data, will not provide insight into how culture serves as an infrastructure and instrument for identity formation and orientation; similarly, the stories, if presented as unconnected to the data, will not support policy intervention or resource deployment. But taken together as both figure and ground, that is, figuratively speaking, they represent the kind of cartography that makes visible what traditional research perspectives and metrics overlook, producing both new place-based knowledge and cultural scripts for community transformation.

My own interest in such cartographic practices is long standing, and began from a narrative-focused standpoint. For two decades, working with multiple research teams across Canada, I have been engaged in a close reading of Canadian social geographies and the practice of cultural mapping.<sup>1</sup> My primary research focus has been on small cities and smaller communities, places that, like the regions featured

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1 See, for example, Duxbury & Garrett-Petts, 2024; Duxbury et al., 2015; Garrett-Petts, 2005, 2014, 2023; Garrett-Petts & Gladu, 2021; Garrett-Petts & Karsten, 2019; MacLennan et al., 2005.

in this volume, occupy subaltern positions in the national and global hierarchies of culture and capital. Beginning in 2001, Nancy Duxbury's interests and my own converged, as we began working in concert on two national mapping initiatives charting the cultural futures of small cities; and later we co-edited with David MacLennan and then Alys Longley two essay collections on cultural mapping as a vehicle for cultural inquiry and arts-informed practice (Duxbury et al., 2015, 2019). More recently, and although I have not been directly involved, the IN SITU project has proven instrumental in moving my understanding from a focus on documentation and analysis toward transformation, from representation toward what I now recognise as participatory figurative cartography. That evolution mirrors a broader shift within my home discipline of English and Language Studies, where the spatial turn has generated new fields of inquiry, in particular, literary cartography, geocriticism, and the spatial humanities, that put space, place, and mapping at the centre of how we read texts and social contexts. What I have come to understand through this trajectory is that the tools and sensibilities developed through a close reading of narrative and metaphor, through attention to how language constructs and contests meaning, are not peripheral to cultural mapping but essential to it. Literary and language scholars, it turns out, have something of significance to say about how we understand the cartographic practices that inform regional cultural policy and community self-representation.

This is where I see Tally's work as illuminating. He notes that literary texts provide "enumerable examples of fictional 'maps,' filled with figural representations of real and imaginary places, which can be used by readers to orient themselves in their own lives and lived spaces" (2018, p. 1). The emphasis on orientation seems crucial here, for the maps that tell the kind of stories that help us navigate our lives are not primarily about mimetic accuracy—reproducing territory at scale—but about helping people find themselves, make sense of their position, plot possible routes forward. And this navigational function depends

precisely on the map's figural dimension: the selection of what to show and what to hide, the metaphors and symbols deployed, the stories the map tells about relationships between places. Tally's focus on the figurative opens up consideration of how narrative and interpretive practices might inform cartographic methods more broadly. What if the community cultural mapping undertaken by the IN SITU Labs operates according to similar principles? What if the fierce listening required to map not only what is there but what is experienced depends on treating mapping as a narrative art—interpretive, selective, and world-constituting rather than merely world-mirroring?

Tally repeatedly stresses that all maps are fictions, and that the cartographic work done by novels is figurative or allegorical rather than mimetically accurate. He traces his notion of literary cartography back to Fredric Jameson's concept of "cognitive mapping"—"a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole" (Jameson, 1991, p. 51, quoted in Tally, 2011). Jameson's implied framework has significant value for cultural mapping, suggesting as it does how individual place attachments connect to larger regional identities and policy structures, moving us closer to the ungraspable totality that cultural mapping seeks to render legible. Perception and mapping are thus, in Tally and Jameson's terms, figurative and metonymic—an assemblage of parts into a provisional whole. The stories we tell about and through mapping are necessarily interpretive acts that construct rather than simply report spatial relationships. Narrative and memory are vital constituent elements of mapping, and to really "know a place" is not only to plot its coordinates, but to map, read, and narrate it through multiple registers simultaneously. The IN SITU regional Labs perform precisely such mapping, foregrounding stories, metaphors, and affective attachments not as decorative supplements but as central cartographic data. Further, the cultural mapping practices performed in each of the six Labs make visible, legitimate, and explicit

the researchers' own figurative work, employing the full repertoire of narrative art—including metaphor, allegory, symbolism, montage—to show how communities construct space and place. In their hands, cultural mapping becomes a way of staging different figural world-projections in dialogue or productive tension with one another, revealing how peripheral places narrate themselves and, through that narration, orient collective action toward desired futures.

References to “story,” “storytelling,” and their variants appear in every chapter of this volume, becoming a critical throughline for the project as a whole. This is neither accidental nor merely rhetorical. The working assumption animating IN SITU’s research is that effective cultural mapping requires holding space for places to narrate themselves, and that researchers must develop the capacity to receive, interpret, and represent those narratives without imposing metropolitan frameworks or deficit models that position peripheral regions as lacking what more urban centres possess. Cultural maps, so conceived, seek to combine the tools of modern cartography with vernacular and participatory methods of storytelling to represent spatially, visually, and textually the embodied knowledge and memories of local communities. In contrast to conventional maps, cultural maps assert that local inhabitants possess expert knowledge of their environments and can effectively represent a socially or culturally distinct understanding of landscape that includes information excluded from mainstream or official maps. IN SITU goes further, maintaining that the landscapes themselves are saturated with story—are in effect “storyscapes”; and that, by extension, cultural maps and cultural mapping should aspire toward a radical rethinking of figure/ground relations.

The challenge, then, for cultural mappers becomes one of “[m]apping not only what is there, but what is felt, remembered, forgotten, and imagined” (see chapter 1). In practical terms this involves a process

of fierce listening to the people and the land, of honouring the value of local knowledge, place, word, and image. It also invites consideration of cultural mapping as a narrative art. At the very least, in Tally's (2011) terms, such a project casts cultural mapping as a "spatially symbolic act."

There is, of course, considerable critical precedence for identifying the narrative inflection and potential of maps. Harley (1989) reminds us that maps are rhetorical constructions, never neutral, constructed historically in the service of power, with silences and absences as significant as what's shown. Wood (1992) elaborates on the power of maps, characterising cartographic choices as persuasive moves, and maps themselves as "narratives with designs on us." More recently, Caquard (2013) has charted in detail the narrative turn in cartography, in effect "mapping narrative cartography," exploring how maps can tell stories through multimedia and how digital affordances enable temporal, experiential mapping. What figurative speaking adds, especially in the context of community-engaged cultural mapping, is an epistemological stance supporting the practical demonstration of how participatory mapping can counter hegemonic narratives with community stories drawn from lived and living experience. Such a stance and practice operationalises theory, drawing in affective, embodied knowledge as legitimate data; it sees and embraces mapping as participatory community praxis; it favours the democratisation of knowledge, inviting and valorising mapping as a constructive methodology—showing, that is, how to practice mapping as a conscious narrative art in service of community self-representation. Where traditional cartography presupposes figures on a neutral ground, in figurative cartography the ground itself is figured as storyscape.

If I'm reading the example of IN SITU correctly, the implicit challenge for cultural mappers thus becomes one of developing and enacting what might be called narrative competence—the ability to listen to and read both people and land, to honour the value of local knowledge, to

recognise and document faithfully place-based memory, vernacular language, and visual imagery that resists standardisation. Festival attendance figures provide valuable information, but say nothing about how festivals reflect and shape community identity, or how they speak to landscape and history, or what futures they might inspire. The number of artists in a region matters, but so does the individual story of the emigrant who returns home with a fresh perspective on how to identify underused cultural assets, or history of the amateur choir that provides an essential social glue across generations, or the medieval fortress reimaged as a contemporary cultural venue. These stories, detailed in the chapters that follow, are themselves data: they reveal culture's narrative infrastructure and orient both wayfaring and local planning in ways that resist easy quantification. Treating cultural mapping as a narrative art means developing methodologies that can hold literal and figural registers in productive tension, that can produce both the standardised inventories policymakers require and the thick descriptions communities need to see themselves authentically reflected.

What does this look like in practice? The IN SITU Labs provide a compelling demonstration. These Labs occupy "third spaces" (Soja, 1996) that are neither purely academic nor purely community-based, but hybrid zones where different forms of knowledge and authority can meet on more equal terms. They position themselves between the university and the community, between research and practice, between documentation and transformation. Their role is especially important because the kind of cultural mapping taken up by the Labs does not adhere to a single methodology. Instead, cultural mapping is invoked as a research paradigm inspired by the principles and ethics of community-engaged research (Poyntz et al., 2025). Then taking a mixed methods approach, the Labs host multiple opportunities for community engagement via community forums, focus groups, and working groups. Here we see the co-creation of heat maps, SWOT analyses of regional cultural ecosystems, and charrettes designed to



map a collective vision of possible cultural futures. The commitment to meaningful participation ensures that the Labs do not simply extract this information for third party consumption by academics or policymakers. Instead, they create conditions for what the concluding chapter calls “knowledge co-creation,” sharing cartographic authority with communities and producing representations that communities can use to orient themselves differently to their places and futures.

What we see here, and as captured so poignantly in the words of the research groups, is a “perspective shift,” a new figural representation enabling and empowering articulation of personal and public cartographies that constitute, collectively, “a paradigm shift in how we understand and imagine peripheral areas as sites of cultural expression and creative production.” As this volume’s concluding chapter reminds us, “perspective matters.” New perspectives help clear away those “established narratives that have confined non-urban areas to a passive role in relation to metropolitan centres ....” They allow “a narrative of Valmiera as a cultural and creative region ... to take root.” They encourage reflection in Galway of how its “landscapes bear the traits of ancient transformations, an often disgruntled dialogue between time and stone that continues to shape the region’s identity”; and that “beneath the hard stoney hills and rugged shores lies a geological narrative, a tragicomedy that has been a hundred million years in the writing.” They reveal how, in the Azores, “the reimagining of cultural expression ... is a narrative of transformation and continuity, and how, “[b]y creating a platform for dialogue and innovative storytelling, ... [their festival culture] challenges established narratives and encourages new interpretations of what it means to be Azorean.” They help clarify how in the island Zlarin, where the Croatian Coral Centre is located, an “important aspect of the Centre is its current role in revitalisation of the island and combining historical, cultural and environmental narratives”; and that those narratives form a “complex historical layering—from medieval power to socialist productivity to post-war neglect—[offering] both a narrative of

decline, and a foundation for new cultural imaginaries and revitalisation strategies grounded in the built environment and community memory.” They reveal to participants in Iceland that its stories, its sagas, remain “living texts”—that its

*stories are not confined to the pages of history. They are part of the living fabric of the land, woven through landscapes, communities, and the everyday lives of people who continue to draw meaning from them. These stories, shaped across centuries, remind us that our individual and collective identity is built through the narratives we inherit, reimagine, and pass on. They teach us how we perceive ourselves, how we understand the places we belong to, and how we relate to the wider world.*

Despite the absence of a single shared methodology, the Labs’ understanding of “the landscape as storyscape” nonetheless has methodological implications: it is one thing to layer our stories on a map’s physical features, but it is quite something else to recognise the physical and the figural as mutually constitutive, inseparable in practice, even if analytically distinguishable.

As you read through the chapters, I encourage you to consider how these literal and figural registers interpenetrate in practice. In the Galway chapter, for example, the researchers take creative licence to trace the region through its “geological canvas,” beginning with Connemara marble—Precambrian metamorphic rock formed through intense heat and pressure: We are told that

*Beneath the hard stoney hills and rugged shores lies a geological narrative, a tragicomedy that has been a hundred million years in the writing. In the west, angularly angry mountains shimmer with purpley-green veins of Connemara marble. This beauty was born of intense heat and pressure in the Precambrian past. Used in churches, monuments, and intricate jewellery, this stone has*

*become a tangible connection between place and culture. Yet in it we see both beauty and tragedy. The grey green veneer speaks of a landscape that bore little else in terms of natural bounty. The land from under which it was ripped is a stony one that couldn't support a growing population. On the sleek marble we see the tears of mothers who said goodbye to their children as they made for a life in the new world, for their descendants to return and purchase a little bit of it for a keyring that they might show their friends in Minnesota or Middlesbrough.*

The marble cannot be mapped only geologically. It is simultaneously a symbol of emigration tragedy (on its surface “we see the tears of mothers who said goodbye to their children”), an economic commodity (quarried and sold as jewelry to diaspora descendants), and a cultural emblem (adorning local cathedrals and monuments). To map Galway's creative economy requires understanding how this stone circulates through multiple registers at once. The harsh soils that produced the marble forced generations of emigration, which created diaspora networks that now sustain certain cultural industries, and which keep quarries economically viable.

Culture thus described remains a moving target, a matter of relationships, of objects and subjects in narrative circulation; and cultural mapping becomes a matter of creating a system of correspondences that foregrounds patterns of agreed upon significance. The mapping, in other words, participates in making a new reality by making a new cultural orientation visible—new language, new categories, new ways of seeing poised to enable different policies and practices. This is cartography in its most performative mode: the map articulates the territory, or at minimum co-creates it, by making certain futures imaginable and actionable.

Pragmatically, the six Labs demonstrate what becomes visible when we practice cartography, figuratively speaking—when we acknowledge that

all mapping involves selection, interpretation, and world-construction, and when we develop methodologies and practices that make this figural work explicit and accountable. The thick mapping practices show how researchers can hold space for communities to represent themselves through reference to and representation of lived experience, while also producing the comparative data and policy-relevant analysis that enable resource allocation and strategic planning. This is the promise of cultural mapping as a narrative art: it can be rigorous without being reductive, comparative without being homogenising, evidence-based without excluding the affective and aspirational dimensions through which culture actually operates in lived experience.

What emerges from the IN SITU project is nothing less than a challenge to dominant epistemologies of cultural research and policy. The urban-centric frameworks that have long shaped cultural studies, creative economy research, and arts policy assume certain conditions: density, diversity, rapid turnover, extensive formal infrastructure, separation of production from consumption, and privileging a professionalisation of cultural work. These frameworks have generated valuable insights about urban cultural dynamics. But, as the authors make clear throughout this volume, when applied to peripheral regions, big city insights and metrics often function less as neutral analytical tools and more as normative standards that measure peripheries by their deviation from metropolitan norms.

The IN SITU project may not fully elaborate such an alternative epistemology, but it demonstrates its necessity and points toward its contours. Cultural mapping here becomes the methodological vehicle through which peripheral places can articulate their own cultural logics; and this means taking seriously the possibility that lower population density enables cultural continuities worth preserving, that slower or more idiosyncratic rhythms of motion and change permit forms of intergenerational transmission that more rapid turnover disrupts, that rootedness in place generates cultural value that mobility disperses, that

amateur practice sustains community in ways that professionalisation cannot, that unofficial heritage carries meaning that official formal designation may not capture. Concrete implications for cultural policy design would surely follow, with, say, the introduction of equitable local funding mechanisms that intentionally recognise amateur practice and community-organised culture alongside formal institutions; the introduction of metrics sensitive to cultural continuity and intergenerational transmission as well as innovation and growth; the introduction of planning approaches that begin from a place of local and regional self-understanding rather than from the importation of metropolitan templates. The challenge here is one of fundamentally rethinking how cultural vitality in rural and remote communities is recognised, defined, measured, and supported.

“Figuratively speaking” was introduced in this foreword as incidental wording that seemed to qualify Tally’s claim about literary cartography, suggesting something approximate or metaphorical. But as argued here, and as the IN SITU regional studies demonstrate, the clause seems readymade for naming a way of knowing tied to a fundamental truth about all community-engaged cartographic practice: maps are never merely innocent, technical reproductions of territory, but are instead always partly figural constructions shaping how we orient ourselves in space and possibility. The question is not whether to map figuratively—we always do. The question is whether and how to acknowledge and embrace this narrative orientation, to develop a narrative competence defined here as the ability to read, represent, and respond to the stories through which communities construct their sense of place and identity. This is the invitation extended by *Situating Culture*: to learn to map culture differently, to hold space for places to tell their own story, and to practice this cartography with narrative power—figuratively speaking.<sup>2</sup>

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## WORKING DEFINITIONS

**Peripheral:** Places structurally distant from centres of decision-making and dense markets (by travel time, network position, and attention), but often rich in social ties, landscape assets, and slack spaces for experimentation.

**Non-urban:** Settlements and regions below metropolitan thresholds (small towns, villages, islands, dispersed regions); may include small cities with non-metropolitan catchments.

**Rural:** The land-use and settlement pattern within the non-urban, lower density, working landscapes (farming, fishing, forestry).

**Culture-making:** The everyday production of cultural life; artistic practice, venues, festivals, craft, media, heritage activation, *and* the enabling infrastructures, skills, and economies around them.



1

# Cultural and creative ecosystems beyond the city

**Patrick Collins**

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## Who are ‘we’

The Azores archipelago; Galway, Ireland; Western Region, Iceland; Valmiera County, Latvia; Šibenik-Knin County, Croatia; Rauma and Eurajoki, Finland—our regions are very different. There is much that separates them—differences of language, of landscape, of history and heritage. Yet, there is one thing that unifies them, more strongly than any thematic convergence or methodological similarity—their distance from what is commonly understood as the core region of Europe. These are places referred to variously as remote, rural, or peripheral. They are defined not only by their geography, but their location, defined by how they are positioned—politically, economically, and symbolically—in relation to European centres of power, wealth, and cultural production.

From many different monikers comes a common implication: that our regions are ‘other’ in the context of contemporary Europe. Peripheral not just in location, but in influence and visibility. Yet what does that really mean? Europe itself is a slippery term that defies easy definition. Globally, it is understood as a region of development, affluence, and cultural sophistication. In the popular imagination, ‘Europe’ conjures images of Parisian boulevards, Berlin’s creative buzz, the industrial might of the Ruhr, and the administrative corridors of Brussels. In this version of Europe, the continent is cosmopolitan, networked, and urban.

This is the Europe many are proud of—a continent with a model social contract, progressive labour laws, and institutions that (for the most part) seek to protect human rights and democratic values. Culturally, Europe has contributed enormously to the global canon: from the upgrade of human consciousness that was the Renaissance in art

and music to the experimental impulses of 20th-century modernism, from the birth of the fashion industry to architectural movements that transformed how we inhabit space. Europe has been, and continues to be, a generative force in cultural production, in what it is to be human.

Yet here again, in considering all of this, the mental image is weighted toward the city. From the coffee shops and salons of Vienna at the turn of the 20th century to the contemporary studios of Milan, the cultural capitals of Europe are mapped clearly onto its urban centres. This correspondence between place and cultural form has been well documented. The literature on culture and place is rich with analyses of how cities shape creative innovation—how they function as crucibles of exchange, diversity, density and BUZZ. And yet, this well-established urban lens can obscure as much as it reveals.

This book sets out to redress that imbalance. It does not dispute the vibrancy of Europe's cities, but shifts the perspective outward—to the edges of the continent, to its less-dense and less-visible regions. Our focus is on the kinds of culture that flourish beyond the city limits, in places that the external gaze rarely settles on. These are places that lie beyond the metropolitan spotlight, often figuratively and literally at the margins of Europe. Places that are occasionally romanticised, more often overlooked, and frequently misunderstood.

The literature on regional development, particularly within the European context, has long grappled with the problem of the periphery. Too often, these regions are framed through deficit models—'lagging,' 'left behind,' or 'catching up.' They are cast as spaces where development has not yet arrived, or where modernity's full benefits have yet to be felt. This is a framing that sees such places only in relation to others, defining them by what they lack rather than what they have. And more crucially, it assumes a teleology: that peripheries should aspire to become more like centres.

In this book, we resist that framing. Our interest is not in what these places are missing, but in what they are making. Not what they lack, but what they contribute. We argue that peripheral regions are generative sites of culture in their own right, not simply receptacles for metropolitan influence or rural backdrops for urban consumption. The cultural forms found here—whether in language preservation, landscape-inspired art, or community-driven performance—are not marginal echoes of centre-produced culture. They are place-based expressions with their own logic, their own histories, and their own futures.

This requires us to rethink what peripherality means. It is not just a condition of location, but one that is political, cultural and psychological. Peripherality can foster certain kinds of resilience and inventiveness; it can enable deep-rootedness as much as isolation. And crucially, it can give rise to culture making that is rooted to—and inseparable from—the landscapes and communities from which it emerged.

Those familiar with the regions featured in this volume will already sense their shared characteristics. Those encountering them for the first time will find in the accompanying maps a set of places stretching across Europe's outer edges—from the wild Atlantic coast of Ireland to the volcanic islands of the Azores, from the fjord-lined shores of Iceland to the dense forests of Latvia, from the stone-walled villages of Croatia to the western archipelago territories of Finland. What these places share is not a singular cultural tradition or demographic profile, but a position: they sit outside the dominant circuits of power and production, and from that position, they have developed distinct cultural ecologies.

Our aim is to understand these places on their own terms. To listen carefully to how their communities express identity, tradition, and innovation. We acknowledge that these are not homogenous areas: within the category of 'peripheral' lie diverse types of rural, post-industrial, and island geographies. Some are agriculturally productive; others are economically constrained. Some are undergoing rapid change; others

experience a sense of suspended time. But across this diversity, we find a common thread: culture matters here. It shapes how people live, how they remember, how they adapt, and how they imagine the future.

In highlighting this, we hope to challenge the implicit hierarchy that still shapes much cultural policy and economic planning. That hierarchy tends to privilege high-density, high-output models of culture, and to favour metrics that align with commercial viability. We argue instead for a broader understanding—one that recognises the cultural value of continuity, of rootedness, of intergenerational memory. And one that appreciates how culture in these places is often deeply embedded in the land, in the seasons, and in the specificities of place.

We do not wish to frame this as an argument ‘against’ the city. Rather, we aim to broaden the lens—to make room for a more plural understanding of where culture happens, how it happens, and why it matters. If the urban has dominated cultural theory and policy, then this book proposes a complementary view. A view from the edge, perhaps—but also a view with its own clarity and insight.

The next section introduces the regions that form the empirical core of this work. In bringing these experiences together, our hope is that we can make the case that culture made beyond the metropolis is not peripheral to Europe’s cultural story. It is central to the identities and futures of the places where it is found. And, as a result, it is deserving of our full attention.

## The ‘we’

Across each of our case study regions, there is a consistent thread: culture is not an abstract layer laid on top of place, but a product of place itself. Simply put, places breed culture. In some of these chapters, this is

explored through what might be called a topographic reading of culture, one that interprets cultural expression as inseparable from geology, ecology, and the long rhythms of landscape. While the historical and institutional contexts vary widely, culture making is deeply attuned to physical environment and historical inheritance. These are not blank spaces waiting to be activated by creative interventions; they are already rich with meaning, shaped over time through the incessant, argumentative dialogue between people and place.

Our regions are, generally speaking, less densely populated. This is often read as a disadvantage, a barrier to economic development or infrastructural viability. Places of ‘have-nots’. However, lower population density also makes possible a different kind of cultural ecology—one where continuity matters, where intergenerational knowledge circulates more visibly, and where cultural forms emerge in response to isolation, climate, or terrain. In simple terms, these places are less immediately productive by conventional economic measures. The case will be made again that the conventional measures that we conceive of as de facto measures of reality do little to help us understand the places for which they do not capture reality. In deeper terms, measures in our regions are the outcome of geological processes millions of years in the making. Our landscapes are frequently dramatic—sometimes beautiful, sometimes forbidding, always thought-provoking. From the volcanic uplifts of the Azores to the Baltic Sea archipelago of Finland, these lands shape more than settlement patterns; they shape sensibility, aesthetic, and imagination.

In the Azores archipelago, culture is an ongoing negotiation with isolation and volatility. Situated in the mid-Atlantic, far from continental centres, the islands are shaped by their physical remoteness and by the persistent threat of seismic activity. This has given rise to a culture that is both deeply rooted and outward-looking—drawing strength from agricultural and religious traditions, while also maintaining strong



links to diasporic communities and drawing inward new residents from an array of nationalities. In the Azores chapter, we see how landscape, heritage, and the enduring memory of emigration combine to form a cultural narrative that is as much about continuity as it is about loss. The challenge here is not just preserving culture, but recognising its evolving role in an archipelago shaped by outflow, return, and reinvention.

In Galway and the west of Ireland, the connection between culture and place is perhaps best expressed in the role of language. The Irish language—or *Gaeilge*—survives most vigorously in the region's Gaeltacht areas, where cultural policy, education, and creative media intersect with everyday life. The growth of a film and television sector in this region is not only an economic development; it is also a cultural intervention aimed at ensuring the survival and relevance of the Irish language. As the chapter notes, these are cultural industries with layered significance: they produce economic value, yes, but also linguistic continuity, intergenerational pride, and a shared sense of identity. In Galway, we see how culture-making in a peripheral region can act as a strategy for cultural resilience.

Moving to the western region of Iceland, we are introduced to a landscape where human settlement feels provisional—nestled within a larger force of nature. The sagas that originate here are foundational to Icelandic identity, and they remain living texts, referenced and reimagined in contemporary cultural life. What makes the Icelandic case compelling is the extent to which these literary traditions continue to inflect regional identity. They do not belong only to the past; they are still operative, shaping how people imagine their place in a larger story. Here, cultural mapping is not just about locating sites of heritage, but about understanding the layers of narrative, myth, and memory that continue to animate daily life.

In Valmiera County, Latvia, the cultural landscape is shaped by post-Soviet transitions and a strong amateur arts tradition. The chapter on Latvia illustrates how cultural practice is sustained through community

initiative, rather than formal infrastructure. While national cultural policies play a role, the heartbeat of Valmiera's culture is found in choirs, local theatre groups, and intergenerational participation in folk traditions. These are not marginal hobbies but essential social glue—providing continuity, cohesion, and collective identity in the face of broader economic and demographic challenges. What emerges from the Latvian case is a portrait of culture as connective tissue—not only expressive, but necessary.

Šibenik-Knin County in Croatia presents a case where the cultural contrasts between coast and hinterland are stark. On the coast, we find significant investment in heritage restoration, festivals, and creative industries, much of it linked to tourism. Inland, by contrast, cultural life often continues without external support, driven by local actors and small associations. The chapter underscores how uneven development shapes cultural possibility—but also how communities respond with ingenuity and commitment. The region's dramatic history—from the Yugoslav period through to recent post-war reconstruction—is visible in its cultural expressions, many of which serve as acts of remembrance and renewal. This is a region where culture often operates quietly, yet with great depth.

In Finland, the twin municipalities of Eurajoki and Rauma offer a dual lens on place and culture. One is defined by its proximity to the Olkiluoto nuclear facility—a symbol of modern infrastructure embedded in a relatively sparse landscape. The other has deep roots in maritime traditions, lace-making, and wooden architecture. In both cases, cultural life is shaped by a careful negotiation with history, environment, and economy. Cultural mapping here reveals not just fixed assets, but patterns of participation and meaning—how residents attach value to certain practices, how memory is transmitted, and how culture is used to anchor a sense of belonging in a fast-changing world.

What unites these case studies is not a shared cultural form or a common policy framework, but a shared question: what does culture do in these

places? And how might we better understand its contribution, not only to economic development, but to place-making, to belonging, to continuity? The approach taken across the chapters is deliberately qualitative, grounded in cultural mapping techniques that privilege local knowledge, emotional geography, and lived experience. This is not to dismiss quantitative analysis, but to insist that culture—particularly in peripheral regions—often expresses itself in ways that resist easy measurement.

In different ways, each of the chapters makes the case that culture in these regions is not ancillary but elemental. It is how these places narrate themselves. It is how change is mediated, and how identity is maintained or contested. By introducing each region on these terms, we hope to make clear that this book is not merely documenting cultural activity across Europe's edges, but actively listening to how culture emerges from, and gives shape to, the places people call home.

## The point

This book sets out to make the case that the kinds of culture produced in peripheral regions are not merely local expressions—they are elemental to the places themselves. Just as geology shapes the contours of a landscape, so too does culture shape the emotional and symbolic geography of a region. Culture is not an overlay; it is not a set of amenities added to attract the next bus tour. It is embedded—historically, socially, and spiritually—in the very material of place.

And yet, this deeply ingrained quality of culture often escapes recognition in policy and economic analysis. Increasingly, the argument for culture has been advanced through numbers: contributions to GDP, GVA, or employment statistics. These are, of course, important metrics. They help position culture within broader development strategies and offer a language that is easy to interpret by policy-makers. But our work

sets out to show that they do not tell the whole story. Indeed, the work may obscure more than they reveal, especially when applied uniformly across regions that function very differently from metropolitan centres.

The kinds of culture that are most easily captured in numerical terms—ticketed events, screen outputs, licensed enterprises—are often the most commercial and transient. There is nothing inherently wrong with this; indeed, such cultural forms can carry great energy and innovation. However, to reduce culture to those expressions alone is to miss the slower, deeper processes through which people make meaning, sustain community, and inhabit a place. Culture in peripheral regions may not always register in the formal economy, but it is essential to social resilience, to a sense of continuity, and to the capacity to adapt and respond to change.

This is, in part, why we turned to experimental forms of cultural mapping in each of our case study regions. While the next chapter will go into methodological detail, it is important to state here that these exercises—through workshops, Speak Outs, conversations, and fieldwork—were not simply about identifying cultural infrastructure. They were about listening. Listening to how people articulate what matters to them culturally. Listening to how culture makes meaning. Listening to how different generations, occupations, and communities see their place in the cultural life of their region. In doing so, we were trying to move beyond representation toward participation: mapping not only what is there, but what is felt, remembered, forgotten, and imagined.

We encountered regions where the case for culture could be made easily—through vibrant festivals, creative industries, or language revival movements—and others where culture’s impact was more subtle, residing in ritual, in community habit, or in quiet forms of heritage stewardship. Across types, however, the point remained consistent: culture is not a background player. It is active. It does work. It binds people to place and to each other.

The implications of this are broad. If culture is foundational to how places function—not just economically, but socially and psychologically—then our approach to policy must change. It must be context-sensitive. It must move beyond replication of models that work in urban centres and instead start with an understanding of what culture means in a specific place, for the people who live there. Take entrepreneurship as one illustrative example. Increasingly, we understand that entrepreneurship is not a heroic individual act, but the result of environmental conditions—networks of trust, institutions of learning, access to capital, cultural norms of risk and cooperation. Different places produce different forms of entrepreneurship, and supporting them requires different tools.

Culture operates in a similar way. The same investment may yield radically different results depending on context, because culture is so entangled with history, memory, and landscape. A one-size-fits-all model—however efficient it may appear—risks flattening the very diversity that gives these regions their cultural vitality.

What we are advocating for, then, is a more nuanced understanding of culture's role in shaping not just the image of a place, but its actual lived fabric. We are arguing for an approach that sees culture not as ornament or afterthought, but as infrastructure—as important to social cohesion and regional identity as roads, schools, or healthcare.

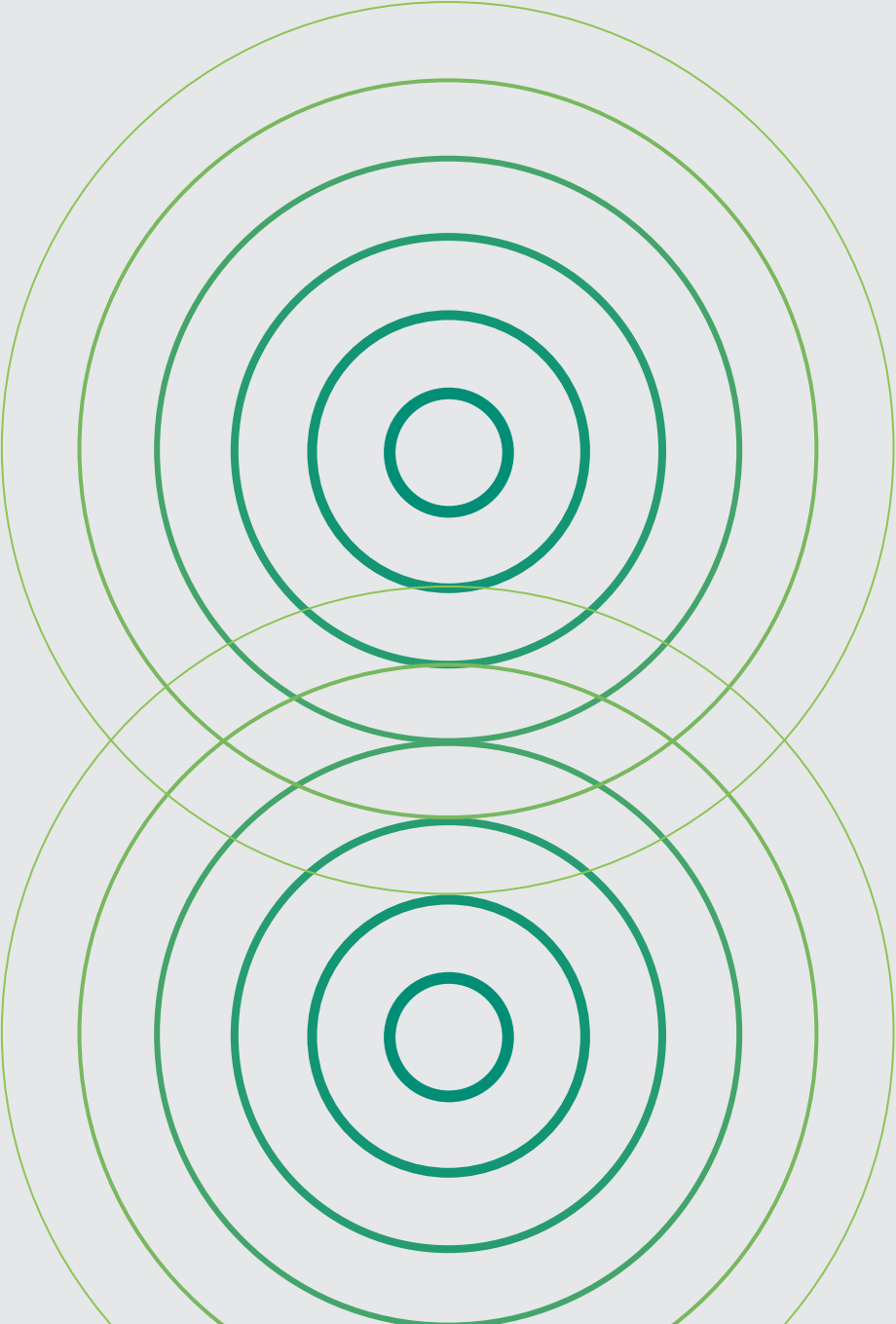
This is not a romantic view. It is a pragmatic one. Regions that invest in their cultural ecosystems—rather than isolated institutions or singular flagship projects—are more likely to retain population, build social trust, and cultivate forms of development that are grounded in the realities of place. Culture, in this sense, is not the opposite of development. It is development—measured differently, experienced more intimately, and expressed in ways that often elude traditional metrics.

Thinking in terms of cultural ecosystems means recognising that culture does not operate in isolation. It flourishes through connections: between generations, between the formal and informal, between physical space and symbolic meaning. It draws on educational institutions, civic networks, memory, and imagination. It includes the visible—theatres, festivals, studios—but also the invisible: social rituals, vernacular knowledge, and shared values.

Such an approach has implications for how we use the term *sustainable* with respect to development. A cultural ecosystem is not only sustainable when it is financially viable or institutionally supported, but when it is resilient—able to adapt, regenerate, and remain meaningful to those who inhabit it. This shifts our attention from cultural outputs to cultural conditions. It encourages us to ask not only what is being made, but what supports the making.

In this volume, we offer a series of grounded studies in how such ecosystems function across peripheral Europe. They are not presented as blueprints, nor as nostalgic outposts of authenticity. Rather, they are sites of experimentation, insight, and learning. Together, they invite a reconsideration of how we understand the role of culture—not as a decorative flourish on the edges of policy, but as one of its central, life-sustaining foundations.







2

# **The IN SITU Labs and cultural mapping: Our methodological overview**

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We are bearing witness to a paradigm shift in how we understand and imagine peripheral areas as sites of cultural expression and creative production. Established narratives that have confined non-urban areas to a passive role in relation to metropolitan centres are making way for new perspectives that recognise them as vital contributors to economic and social development. This shift stems from acknowledging the unique characteristics and potential of peripheral regions that often have distinct cultural heritage, values, practices, and traditions which, alongside geography and landscape, can serve as springboards for new creative and social ventures.

However, the IN SITU project extends beyond merely challenging the urban-centric narratives that have dominated discourse on the creative and cultural industries (CCIs). By shining a spotlight on six non-urban regions, it has illuminated a set of vibrant yet varying creative and cultural ecosystems across Europe. In early 2023, the IN SITU project undertook a programme of cultural mapping across the six Lab regions. This work had quantitative and qualitative dimensions that not only compiled economic data on the CCIs present in each area, but also turned to the creative practitioners, cultural producers, and policymakers themselves, listening to their hopes and concerns, their inspirations and visions for the future and, perhaps most importantly, their experience of living and working in peripheral regions. It was out of these cultural mapping activities, and the variety of voices within them, that new and rich pictures of these non-urban areas emerged. With this knowledge acting as a baseline, the chapters in this book tell the stories of the creative development of the six IN SITU Lab regions, situating data in the geographical context of landscape and culture, people and place.

In our turn to the non-urban, two central questions arise about the IN SITU project: ‘What exactly are the Labs?’ and ‘What is cultural mapping?’. This chapter addresses these questions. Both relate to methodology and practice and the idea of community-engaged research (Mahoney et al., 2021) which is at the core of the project. The chapter goes into detail about the ways in which the cultural mapping was carried out and sets the stage for the chapters that follow.

## What are the IN SITU Labs?

When we talk about Labs in the context of IN SITU, we are talking about spaces of collaboration and knowledge-sharing where different research methods and participatory practices are used to provide living descriptions and grounded analysis of place. The Labs serve as ‘third spaces’ (Soja, 1996; see also Collins et al., 2021) operating at the crossroads between scholarship, civil society, creative practice, and policymaking. It is in these open and generative exchanges between a range of groups, organisations, and individuals that shared understandings of each region—and their creative and cultural potential—can emerge.

Although each Lab varies in its organisational structure, most are attached to higher education institutions such as Bifröst University in Iceland; the University of Galway, Ireland; the University of the Azores, Portugal; the University of Turku, Finland; and the Latvian Academy of Culture, Latvia; while Kultura Nova Foundation in Croatia is an independent cultural foundation. As such they can be considered hybrid spaces that are at once institutionally embedded while also being public-facing. Community-engaged activities are an important aspect of the Labs, as they bridge research and practice. For instance, in the Spring of 2023, IN SITU organised a series of Speak Outs in the Lab regions in which members of the public, along with community and cultural

organisations, were able to present and discuss local development and resource issues. These forums served to identify place-based problems and together explore pathways for improvement. Over 160 participants were involved across the six regions. The Speak Outs took place in a range of venues, whether at Vuojoki Manor in Eurajoki, Finland; the Lady Gregory Hotel in Gort, Ireland; the Kurtuve Contemporary Arts Space in Valmiera, Latvia; or the City Library in Šibenik, Croatia.

Different issues emerged including concerns over youth engagement in rural communities in County Galway, Ireland, and the West Region of Iceland, unmanaged tourism in Šibenik-Knin, Croatia, and the maintenance of built heritage and rural pathways in Finland. Importantly, the Speak Outs connected local development issues to creative practice as, following the events, artists were invited to respond to these local concerns and 12 case studies were selected by the IN SITU project to act as real-world examples of locally responsive and place-based creativity and culture. The Speak Outs were indicative of the importance placed on public engagement by the Labs as they gave space and voice to the community in identifying local development concerns. More generally, through these and other activities, the IN SITU Labs are bringing people together—they are spaces of listening as well as spaces of data-gathering and knowledge-sharing. The Labs not only seek to represent each region through research, but also seek to become an initiator of positive change, a dynamic that infused the cultural mapping programme.

## Cultural mapping

Cultural mapping is a field of interdisciplinary research and a methodological tool in community development and planning that aims to make visible the ways in which cultural assets, both tangible

and intangible, create meaningful places. It is therefore both a means of inquiry into the constitution of a place and a platform for community engagement in the making and remaking of a place. It involves the collection, synthesis, and analysis of cultural data through a range of quantitative and participatory methods, which can then be used to inform strategy, policy, and place-based initiatives (Stewart, 2007; Ortega-Nuere and Bayon, 2015; Duxbury et al., 2015; Freitas, 2016). The cultural mapping undertaken by the IN SITU project not only sought to provide a deepened understanding of each creative and cultural ecosystem, but also sought to enhance relations between people, groups, and organisations while doing so. In short, the cultural mapping processes provided an account of the cultural assets of each locale while also identifying areas for transformation and positive change (see Chiesi and Costa, 2015; Stewart, 2007).

Formal initiatives of cultural mapping are relatively recent and were first used from the 1970s onwards to map, record, locate, and represent the lives and resources of Indigenous peoples in view of preserving connection to their homelands and encouraging participation in policies and actions that directly affect them (Freitas, 2016; Duxbury et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2009; Huovinen et al., 2017). The practice has since come to be used by a wide range of communities and actors to identify the cultural assets, heritage, and diversity of particular places and regions and has also evolved into addressing concerns over sustainability and local development (Duxbury et al., 2015; Huovinen et al., 2017; Freitas, 2016; UNESCO, 2009; Centre for Cultural Management, 2008; Stewart, 2007). Over the course of its history and use across different social, economic, and cultural contexts, a broad range of practices and methods have been deployed which are most often context specific (Taylor, 2013; Duxbury et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2017).

Particularly important for the IN SITU project and its focus on CCIs in non-urban areas of Europe is the connection between cultural mapping

and place-based development. Place-based development advocates for agency at a local level and respect for the nuances of place when devising policies and actions in support of local development. It acknowledges that geography matters and that development must address multiple domains that include social, cultural, political, and institutional specificities (Pugalis and Bentley, 2014; Collins et al., 2021). The IN SITU project builds an understanding of the forms, processes, and policy needs of CCIs located in peripheral areas of Europe and, in doing so, advances the ability of this sector to act as a driver for economic and social innovation, sustainable development, and place-based initiatives.

Broadly speaking, there are two forms of analysis related to cultural mapping that inform place-based development (Freitas, 2016; Duxbury, 2019; see also Reed et al., 2006). The first is a ‘top-down’ or ‘inventory’ approach that is expert-led and utilises quantitative methods to capture the broader dimensions of reality while also offering a standardised means of comparing different locations. The second is a ‘bottom-up’ or ‘humanistic’ approach in which participation from stakeholders and the community is essential to gaining an understanding of the complexity and nuances of a local context. The former develops an accounting of tangible cultural assets, resources, venues, and organisations in order to provide information from which to identify relationships, clusters, and gaps *and* to plan and act from this knowledge base. The latter views cultural mapping as a conversational platform that creates opportunities for dialogue and facilitates the direct involvement of citizens in the reflection on and making of place. Taken together these approaches—whether ‘top-down’ and ‘inventory’ or ‘bottom-up’ and ‘humanistic’—provide a means for cultural mapping to identify measurable trends across a variety of regions and to engage with the more complex link between society and culture.

The IN SITU cultural mapping exercise combined these two approaches in order to build a baseline understanding of the CCI ecosystems in the

six IN SITU Lab regions. The programme first included the creation of two inventories—an inventory of CCIs and an inventory of events, festivals, and organisations in each region. Second, it implemented a series of focus groups involving creative practitioners, cultural producers, and policymakers in each region. These focus groups provided a space for participants to reflect on the current status of each creative and cultural ecosystem, its strengths and weaknesses, its inspiring and motivating elements, and also to collectively imagine potential futures. In deploying this dual method, the cultural mapping programme turns both inwards and outwards in order to form a broad knowledge base that can inform policy while also looking at strategies for transformative change.

## CCI inventories

CCIs are inherently diverse and span activities as varied as performing arts and publishing to film and fashion (The Work Foundation, 2007; Hui, 2007). Therefore, key questions that lay behind the IN SITU cultural mapping programme are: ‘What is included within CCIs?’ and ‘How can they be measured?’. Informed by ongoing debates on the parameters of the industry, two inventories were created (informed by Smith and Warfield, 2008; The Work Foundation, 2007; Bakhshi and Cunningham, 2016; Collins and Murtagh, 2018; Collins et al., 2018). The first was based on NACE (Nomenclature des Activités Economiques dans la Communauté Européenne) coding. NACE is a pan-European classification system of economic activities through which CCIs can be identified and grouped according to the categories of craft, design, advertising, printing, publishing, digital media, software, gaming, TV, radio, film, architecture, engineering, photography, arts, music, theatre, technology, scientific research, and retailing (see Collins et al., 2018, p. 71). In using NACE categories, a standardised classification was therefore established

across the six Lab locations and ensured that the data gathered was representative of broader trends in the respective regions.

Yet, NACE categorisations may not fully encompass what can be considered the culture of a particular region. It was therefore important to provide an additional inventory of events, festivals, and organisations in each Lab location. These organisations could be considered social and cultural actors, state bodies, artist groups, collectives, educational and social organisations, and creative and cultural organisations that did not fall within the first inventory. Together, the two inventories ensured comparable data was being gathered across the six regions.

Gathering regionally specific data from peripheral areas is not an easy task. Obtaining data on NACE categories often meant parsing information from national statistical agencies while data on events, festivals, and organisations often meant building an original inventory through information gleaned from municipal and regional authority websites, local tourism and event calendars, and social media pages. In Galway, Ireland, CCI data was obtained via a special request to the central statistics office in Ireland as well as official and independent events and festival calendars in the City and County. In the west region of Iceland, there was no existing data on CCIs in the region nor had a method been instituted by administrators for categorising them. Thus, the inventories were created from scratch using national statistical and regional events and festival sources. In Valmiera County, Latvia, the Lab collected information from the Development Agency of Valmiera and the Municipality of Valmiera as well as the registry of NGOs from the national government. In Rauma and Eurajoki, Finland, information was gathered from Stats Finland as well as the regional authorities and the Rauma Municipality. In the Azores, Portugal, a mapping of the CCI sector had recently occurred as part of the bid process for the 2027 European Capital of Culture designation. In Šibenik-Knin, Croatia, there were a number of sources used to map CCIs including “The Register of Civil Society Organisations in the Republic of Croatia,” a list



of Cultural Public Institutions mapped by the Kultura Nova Foundation, data on CCIs that have applied to calls of the Ministry of Culture and Media, The Institute of Economy who did a study on CCIs in Croatia, and the Croatian Economy Chamber.

Out of these two inventories emerges a picture of a varying and multifaceted set of creative ecosystems that combine the traditional and the contemporary and are brimming with potential. On the one hand, we observed a pan-European trend towards preserving artisanal techniques and folk traditions. Folk arts and crafts, such as lace-making in Rauma, Finland, and basket weaving and pottery in the Azores, contribute to the local economy and have a strong influence on each regions' cultural landscape. Music, a universal form of cultural expression, also plays an integral role in all six regions, from traditional Irish music and dance in the pubs of Galway through to choral music in Valmiera. On the other hand, the Labs' cultural landscapes also spilled over into more contemporary pursuits such as games development in western Ireland, glass manufacture in Latvia, and experimental music festivals in the Azores.

A creative economy cannot exist without spaces for consumption and celebration or supporting infrastructure. Festivals and events, across scales and genres, attract visitors and locals to celebrate local and international creative expression. This can range from the Galway International Arts Festival in Ireland through to the Walk&Talk Festival in Ponta Delgada, Azores, and the Frostbiter horror film festival in Akranes, Iceland. The revamped medieval fortresses of St. John and St. Michael, on the coastline of the Adriatic Sea, provide spaces for events, festivals, and creative activities in Šibenik, Croatia, while the UNESCO World Heritage sites of Old Rauma and the Bronze Age burial grounds of Sammallahdenmaki in western Finland draw in visitors to the region.

The unique landscapes of these regions provide evocative backdrops for their creative and cultural ecosystems to flourish and the coming

together of natural beauty and cultural heritage is a common trait. This can be found in the stunning volcanic landscapes of the Azores and Iceland, the jagged Baltic Archipelago of western Finland, the rugged hills and sandy beaches of Connemara in County Galway, the striking coastline of Šibenik, and the forests, river valleys, and manor houses of the Valmiera region. Despite each region's distinct cultural offerings, the interplay of traditional crafts and music with contemporary arts and festivals, and the fusion of cultural heritage with natural beauty, reveal shared patterns in their cultural and creative industries. This suggests that despite their non-urban settings these regions are vibrant cultural hubs, challenging the city-centric view of creativity.

## Focus groups

A series of focus groups were held across the six regions with creative practitioners and participants from local governance, adjacent businesses, and the social-cultural fields. The focus groups were intended to offer a space of collective recognition and reflection on the creative and cultural ecosystem of each region and its potential. Flexibility was given so that each Lab could adapt their workshops to the local context and the activities were held both in-person and online. This was particularly important for Labs in regions with dispersed rural populations such as the Azores and the West Region of Iceland. In some cases, this meant 'mini groups' (Greenbaum, 1998, pp. 1-2) of less than six people were used while in other cases larger focus groups of over ten people were organised.

The workshops were focused around three activities. The first was a heat mapping exercise where participants were invited to locate inspiring and creative areas as well areas in need of improvement. Participants were able to interpret these concepts as they saw fit and share their

opinions, reasonings, and narratives with the group. The second activity was a SWOT analysis of the CCI ecosystem that identified the collective strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing each region. The third activity was a future studies exercise in which participants were asked to imagine their ideal CCI ecosystem in 10 to 15 years' time or further ahead and then discuss how this might be achieved. Building on the SWOT analysis, this exercise served to create a collective vision for each region and identify the resources, policies, and actions needed to achieve this vision.

Although the workshops took place in multiple locations, both in-person and online, within and across the six Lab locations, some common themes emerged. Across the Lab regions, from the Azores in the Atlantic Ocean to Šibenik-Knin on the coast of the Adriatic Sea, there was a strong sense of pride in local culture and the natural environment. Indeed, as the SWOT analyses and CCI futures exercises indicated, location and people were often seen as the foundations for the future improvement of CCI ecosystems. This often ran alongside a strong sense of community spirit and collaboration between creative practitioners. In these non-urban regions, mutual support was prioritised over competition. However, several common concerns also emerged from the focus groups. A lack of infrastructure, both in terms of spaces for creative production, rehearsal, performance, and exhibition and in terms of connectivity and transport, was a shared issue across the Lab regions. Another common issue was the lack of strategic planning regarding the CCIs in non-urban regions, which was coupled with a lack of political will or understanding of the sector. In some Lab regions, the relations between creative practitioners and policy- and decision-makers were yet to be fully developed or were strained, while in other regions, such as Eurajoki and Rauma, these relations were an existing strength. The state of funding and financial support for the sector was also a common issue. Contextualising these situations, some areas, such as Galway, struggle with an

accommodation crisis, while other regions, such as Šibenik-Knin, had concerns over depopulation. Across the Labs, a vision of the future emerged in which CCIs were well-supported and networked across multiple scales. This was dependent on improved infrastructure and better strategic planning with the continual input of the creative and culture sector.

## A perspective shift

For most Lab areas, the cultural mapping programme was the first time such region-specific data on CCIs had been gathered and the inventories and focus groups made the social and economic importance of culture and creativity apparent in both quantitative and qualitative ways. For instance, in Valmiera County, which had traditionally been associated with industry and sport, the cultural mapping exercise initiated a perspective shift on the role of the creative industries in local development. As the Valmiera Lab shared the research findings via presentations, workshops, and informal exchanges with local and regional officials, a narrative of Valmiera as a cultural and creative region began to take root. Today, local policymakers acknowledge this shift in perception in how they view and speak about the City and County. Valmiera is increasingly referred to not just as an industrial or sporting centre, but as a cultural region and this new framing has opened doors for cross sectoral collaborations and strategic development between once distinct social and economic domains.

Through its Labs, the IN SITU project is creating new narratives about non-urban areas, grounded in robust data and backed by the voices of creative practitioners and cultural producers. These stories place culture and creativity at the heart of local development and place-identity and speak to the dynamism and potential of peripheral areas.

They tell us that ‘culture matters here’, socially and economically. But this is only the prologue, the start of the narrative. As the IN SITU project continues there will be more to say, more voices to be heard and more of the story to unfold.

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**FIGURE 3.1.**

Map of the West Iceland IN SITU Lab, Iceland, with main centres, connections, and meaningful places. Map developed by Mollu Heino in collaboration with the Iceland Lab team.





3

# **West Iceland:** A symphony of stories and landscapes

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Among the islands of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, rising above the ocean like the Azores archipelago, is Iceland, located further north. Still forming, the island is shaped by volcanoes and tectonic plates that traverse its centre. This chapter takes the reader on an excursion through the shifting landscapes where geology and history intertwine, from the earliest settlements to present-day communities. Visitors and residents alike are captivated by vast panoramas; mountains to shores, lavafields, glaciers, rivers, streams, and waterfalls that inspire the mind to wander farther than the body can follow. In the unspoiled nature, the mind lingers and takes part in creation itself.

## From sagas, farming, and fisheries towards a creative future

These landscapes must have drawn the first settlers over a thousand years ago, when international currents inspired long sea voyages to the edge of the known world. West Iceland was home to many of these pioneers, and we will explore the region's past and present, with a glance toward the future. Regional policy-making in Iceland emphasizes such forward-looking strategies: every region designs a five-year plan aligned with national goals in development, land use, and culture, encouraging public participation in shaping their future.

The famous line by John Donne (1999 [1624]), “No man is an island,” has long resonated within the social fabric of Icelandic society, shaped by its insular geography. One might wonder why a chapter about Iceland, a place known for its rich traditions in fiction, poetry, and literature,

would reference a British writer. The reality is that the diverse group of settlers who arrived in Iceland came from various neighbouring countries, including Celts and what we now call the British. Navigating the country's harsh natural environment demanded a spirit of cooperation and collaboration, as well as the development of practical knowledge and openness to new ideas. Without this collective mindset, the early settlers would have struggled to overcome the challenges posed by Iceland's demanding landscape. It is this cultural heritage that continues to shape Icelandic society today.

This chapter delves into the distinct characteristics of the West Iceland region, focusing on the rich tapestry of sagas and visual art that local inhabitants value. It examines the significance of these cultural elements while addressing the challenges they face. By linking the findings of the IN SITU cultural mapping project with Iceland's regional development framework, the chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the area's cultural landscape and the impact of policy developments. It highlights the role of the Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) in regional identity and community resilience, while also emphasising the growing interest in intangible cultural heritage and exploring how entrepreneurs can integrate and promote these assets within their businesses.

Vesturland, or West Iceland, is a place where the threads of generations are intricately woven with the land itself, where stories, memory, and identity cling to every mountain, fjord, and farm, forming the very fabric of its landscapes and communities. Despite its population of fewer than 18,000, the region feels far more expansive, as if the spirits of the past still walk among the living. Here, the boundaries between centuries seem to dissolve, and figures from long ago remain part of daily life, as though they were friends or neighbours. These characters, drawn from the sagas, from history, and from folklore, live on not as distant relics but as familiar companions in the collective memory of the region.

Today, the inhabitants of West Iceland are dispersed across nine municipalities, each shaped by its own rhythms of life and livelihood. The local economy rests on four foundational pillars: fisheries, agriculture, industry, and tourism. In fishing towns, incomes tend to be higher, while farming communities often operate on more modest means. Yet across this varied landscape, new opportunities are emerging. Tourism, fuelled by Iceland's growing global visibility, has opened doors to both employment and creative enterprise. Technological advancements and the rise of innovative creative pursuits have also generated greater employment prospects. The landscape itself is a canvas of contrasts drawing in visitors in search of wonder. Still, much lies beneath the surface—cultural riches, narratives, and practices that remain underexplored, waiting to be more fully woven into the region's unfolding future.

## Forging the future: Policy, identity, and grassroots collaboration

At a community forum held to establish a profile of West Iceland for the IN SITU project, it became clear that the area's distinctiveness stems from its deep-rooted traditions, striking natural beauty, and respected institutions of learning. Strong ties to Iceland's settlement era and medieval cultural legacy remain a vital part of everyday identity and local knowledge. While some voiced concerns that too heavy a reliance on tradition might inhibit innovation or cultural diversity, others noted how heritage has already been used creatively to develop new enterprises. This potential to strike a meaningful balance between safeguarding cultural identity and embracing forward-looking ideas is key for the region.

Discussions at the forum also revealed a notable lack of collaboration within the region and emphasised a shared desire to strengthen

cooperation among individuals, communities, and local authorities. The 2015 Regional Plans of Action marked a shift in national policy by encouraging greater intermunicipal cooperation and strengthening cultural planning at the regional level. In West Iceland, these policies have created a framework for municipalities to work together in shaping a collective vision for the future. Still, participants stressed that meaningful collaboration must go beyond formal structures; it must include grassroots engagement from citizens, organisations, and institutions alike. Iceland's long-standing two-tier system of governance, consisting of municipalities and the state, has historically shaped this dynamic. The continued need for broader cooperation is now reflected in emerging policy frameworks and calls for new spaces of dialogue, where diverse voices can help shape the region's path forward.

Following the 2008 economic collapse, Iceland's core industries underwent significant transformations. While fisheries were once the country's most important economic sector, the plummeting value of the Icelandic krona and the nation's extensive media coverage—first due to the banking crisis and later the Eyjafjallajökull volcano eruption—led to the country's unique nature and culture becoming major draws for tourists. In 2009, the visitor count reached 566,000. Since then, the number of tourists has steadily increased. According to the Icelandic Tourist Board's departure statistics, the total number of passengers exceeded 2.2 million in 2023, with most visiting Iceland for leisure (Icelandic Tourist Board, 2024). Despite most tourists making a point of stopping in Reykjavík and travelling through South Iceland, a growing number are also exploring other regions of the country. West Iceland is a common route for travellers heading north or towards the Westfjords by car.

For many locals, West Iceland remains a beloved destination for leisure and retreat. The green landscapes around Húsafell, Skorradalur, and Bifröst, with their campgrounds and clusters of summer cabins, are

closely tied to cherished memories. Rivers such as Norðurá, Langá, and Hítará continue to attract salmon anglers in search of peaceful surroundings and time-honoured traditions. Although much has changed in recent decades, these places remain popular during the short Icelandic summer, when sunlight and rain alternate and temperatures occasionally rise into double digits.

The West Iceland region can be divided into four distinct districts: Hvalfjörður, Borgarfjörður, Snæfellsnes Peninsula, and Dalabyggð (see Figure 3.1). To understand West Iceland's cultural landscape, instead of one large focus group, we conducted several smaller groups across the region of the IN SITU Lab to better capture the unique character of each town and their place within the region. This chapter is informed by these discussions and includes a few of the insightful statements that emerged within these events.

## Hvalfjörður and Akranes

Hvalfjörður, the southernmost district, includes Akranes, the largest town in the area with approximately 9,000 inhabitants, and is the district closest to Reykjavík, the capital of Iceland, heading westward. As we begin our journey through West Iceland, we encounter crossroads. We can opt for the quicker, direct tunnel or traverse the historic ring road, which meanders through the picturesque Hvalfjörður. This scenic route, once the primary national road, was superseded by an underwater tunnel nearly 30 years ago, leading most travellers to bypass the fjord today. This shift has brought a sense of tranquillity and seclusion to the fjord, providing us with an opportunity to immerse ourselves in the stunning natural landscape. Hvalfjörður is one of the many deep fjords that characterise Iceland's dramatic terrain. At its innermost point, in Botnsdalur, stands Glymur, Iceland's tallest waterfall, plunging

nearly 200 metres. Reaching this impressive natural feature requires a demanding hike of several hours.

In recent years, Hvalfjörður has become part of a growing movement in well-being and nature-based tourism. A key example is Hvammsvík, where place-making efforts have transformed a historic coastal site into a destination for relaxation and connection with the natural world. With geothermal sea baths set against open ocean views and rugged hills, Hvammsvík has helped position the fjord as a place of renewal, reflection, and quiet retreat.

Along the northern side of the fjord, Hvalfjarðarsveit is a small municipality located with just over 700 residents, most of whom live in the Melahverfi area near the Grundartangi industrial zone. This zone is home to two major industrial facilities: the world's second-largest ferrosilicon plant and Norðurál, one of Iceland's largest aluminium smelters and the biggest employer in West Iceland.

The presence of over 3,000 summer cottages throughout the region significantly increases the rural population during the summer months. Skorradalur in Hvalfjarðarsveit is one of the main summer cottage areas, and the influx of seasonal residents boosts the population of this otherwise sparsely populated but relatively affluent area. Visitors are drawn by the natural beauty and hiking opportunities. The fjord's peaceful environment also provides a fitting setting for the War and Peace Museum at Hlöð. The museum chronicles Iceland's role during the Second World War, when the country was occupied by British and American forces, and highlights the strategic significance of Iceland's North Atlantic location, which led to a large military presence in Hvalfjörður during the war and inserted the small population of Iceland into the geopolitics of modern times.

Due to the small size of Hvalfjarðarsveit, there have been collaborative efforts with nearby local authorities across various initiatives. However,

cooperation between towns and villages within municipalities, as well as between municipalities across West Iceland more broadly, is often seen as lacking. Community forum discussions have revealed the gradual emergence of a shared regional identity and underscored the importance of fostering greater self-awareness, place attachment, and community participation across the region.

Choosing the shorter route at the crossroads leads to the seaside town of Akranes, the largest municipality in West Iceland, with a population of around 9,000. The town lies in the shadow of the striking mountain ranges Akrafjall and Skarðsheiði, which provide a dramatic natural backdrop. These mountains have been poetically described as “purple dreams,” capturing their surreal and ethereal beauty in the poem “Vorkvöld í Reykjavík” (e. “Springnight in Reykjavik”) by the poet Sigurður Þórarinsson (no date). The Hvalfjörður Tunnel has transformed life in Akranes, reducing the commute to the capital region from nearly two hours to just about 30 minutes, significantly improving residents’ access to employment.

At the Speak Out in Akranes, participants identified a lack of economic diversity as a key challenge for the region, especially in terms of engaging young people. This has limited their involvement in important social and policy discussions. The forum stressed the need to ensure that all groups, particularly young people and vulnerable populations, have access to consultation processes and can participate in planning. Creating platforms for regional dialogue was seen as crucial to attracting younger generations and supporting innovation.

Later group discussions expressed satisfaction with cultural initiatives in schools and kindergartens, highlighting the importance of integrating arts education at the preschool and primary levels. The town’s schools regularly organise music and theatre events that attract audiences beyond the local community. Several innovative initiatives in Akranes also actively involve younger residents. One notable project repurposes



old harbour structures for sea diving. A young local couple leads courses in diving and sea jumping, encouraging participants to overcome their fear of heights by jumping from platforms and trampolines into the harbour. As Akranes has become more accessible from Reykjavík, however, there has been an overall decrease in local cultural events, as residents often opt for the capital city's broader range of activities. Focus group participants note that the shift of shopping centres away from the historic downtown has also scattered social life.



**FIGURE 3.2.**  
Akranes Folk  
Museum. Photo:  
Erna Kaaber

Since 1998, Akranes has undergone considerable change. While the industrial zone at Grundartangi has played a role, the fishing industry has long shaped the town's development, establishing it as one of Iceland's key fishing hubs. This maritime history is preserved and showcased at the Akranes Folk Museum (Figure 3.2). Its growth was fuelled by access to abundant fishing grounds and the mechanisation of Iceland's fishing sector. The twentieth century brought harbour construction and the rise of trawler operations, which formed Iceland's first major industry. This led to the development of freezing plants and fostered a vibrant community life. However, the fishing quota system eventually concentrated ownership in fewer locations, and Akranes was not immune to this trend. In recent decades, fishing and onshore processing have declined significantly.

After the departure of H. B. Grandi's fishing operations, the new quota owner and the municipality worked together to redevelop the

former factory site at Breiðin. Today, the Breiðin Innovation Centre occupies the old facility, focusing on fostering entrepreneurship and strengthening the local business community. The innovation hub has been well-received, fostering numerous collaborations across diverse fields. Nevertheless, enhancing the connectivity between such hubs within the region is essential to further leverage these advancements, as noted in forum discussions:

*An amazing success has been achieved by mixing people together in Breiðin, offering a variety of activities in Akranes. But it is necessary to build a network between these core spaces, between municipalities. That would create the most progress in the shortest amount of time.*

In the region, core hubs have developed, fostering their own networks. Professionals within these hubs often collaborate across disciplines on various projects. Such networking is particularly vital in sparsely populated areas, where individuals frequently juggle multiple cultural responsibilities and struggle to manage everything independently. The precarious and unpredictable nature of project funding often leads to rapid burnout.

*Cultural activities require persistence and it can be difficult to maintain projects when people leave. Networks are easily broken because few people do too many jobs, juggle too many balls. And when they leave, a lot of structure and knowledge can disappear with them.*

Akranes has been slow to transition from fishing to tourism, partly because the town lacks sufficient visitor accommodations. There are currently no hotels, which has limited growth in the sector. Nevertheless, two international film festivals have gained momentum over the past decade. The IceDocs documentary festival and the Frostbiter horror film festival have become key events in the town's cultural calendar.

Organisers have creatively arranged accommodation for festival guests in private homes, institutions, and the few available guesthouses. A hotel and spa are now planned for Langasandur, the town's scenic sandy beach, which offers panoramic views over Faxaflói. Football is also a central part of life in Akranes, with many of Iceland's most well-known players emerging from the local club, ÍA. The proposed hotel development partly overlaps with the football grounds and coincides with plans for new sports facilities and activities. Participants in the focus group analysis considered this a conflict area:

*Building the hotel in Langasandur is controversial because it would require moving the townspeople's beloved communally built football stand. An investor's interest in Langasandur is driving this decision, highlighting the power of money.*

This tension between attracting tourists and focusing on residents is also evident in other areas. In recent years, a geothermal pool was constructed along the beach to enrich community life. Intended as a local gathering place where residents could bathe in the sea and relax in the Guðlaug pool while enjoying ocean views, it quickly became a symbol of the town's character and communal spirit. However, word of the pool spread beyond the local community, and it has since become a tourist attraction. What was once envisioned as a tranquil, community-focused space is now frequently visited by tourists, often outnumbering locals. This shift has caused some friction, as residents feel a sense of ownership over the pool's original purpose. In response, an entry fee was introduced to regulate the number of users and preserve the atmosphere that made the pool special in the first place.

Geothermal pools are deeply woven into Icelandic culture. They have been in use since the settlement period, thanks to the country's abundant geothermal resources. In contemporary times, these pools serve as vital communal hubs where individuals connect and converse in a relaxed atmosphere, fostering deeper relationships and dialogue than

is typically possible amidst the rush of daily life. Beyond Akranes, the nearby Borgarfjörður region is also known for its geothermal activity, which holds both historical and cultural significance.

## Borgarfjörður

Borgarfjörður, the largest district by land area, lies centrally between the three other districts. It has long been a prosperous agricultural area, enriched by lush land, plentiful fishing rivers and lakes, and a varied natural landscape.

The largest town in the district, Borgarnes, is a service town of 2,400 inhabitants, which has served one of Iceland's most fertile farming communities for generations. The town is situated in one of the most picturesque municipal areas of Iceland. The dramatic landscape, with its large boulders and the interplay between the North Atlantic Ocean and the Hvítá River estuary, likely captivated the imagination of the original settlers. The history of the region is closely tied to the narrative of *The Saga of Egill*, one of the oldest Icelandic sagas. Egill, a member of the first generation of Icelanders, was the son of the settler Skallagrímur, and his family was known for their fiery temperament and physical prowess. Their homestead of Borg in Mýrar was the principal estate of Borgarfjörður. The Settlement Exhibition in Borgarnes provides detailed accounts of the settlement era, including how the farms of Skallagrímur's main associates were arranged around the principal estate and how the region's key settlement farms are still inhabited today.

The establishment of the Settlement Centre (Figure 3.3), a multifaceted cultural centre, has transformed Borgarnes from a service area for agriculture into a tourist destination. Founded 20 years ago by two actors, the centre breathes life into *The Saga of Egill* and honours the

Viking Age legacy of West Iceland, demonstrating how cultural heritage can play a vital role in contemporary place development. Additionally, the centre contains a restaurant and the Sagaloft venue for diverse events, ranging from retellings of the old sagas to theatre productions. Workshops and focus group discussions have highlighted the significant impact the centre has had on the development of this small town:

*Do you remember what Borgarnes was like before the Settlement Centre opened? It was nothing but the convenience stores and perhaps the hotel. Now, one can choose from many restaurants, and there are various events, such as folk dance groups and choirs that specifically host exhibitions for tourists.*

Another significant landmark in the Borgarfjörður district is Reykholt, the home of Snorri Sturluson, a thirteenth-century chronicler and scholar who is believed to have authored *The Saga of Egill*. He is also credited with the *Snorra Edda*, a foundational work that preserves Norse mythology, outlines the techniques of skaldic verse, and offers a detailed account of the gods, the cosmos, and their role in shaping fate and the afterlife. Snorri is

**FIGURE 3.3.**  
The Settlement Centre  
in Borgarnes. Photo  
courtesy of The  
Settlement Centre



celebrated not only for his impact on Icelandic history, but also for his lasting contributions to European and Nordic cultural heritage, having meticulously recorded ancient myths and literary traditions that continue to resonate today. From his base in Reykholt, Snorri built a wide-reaching network of influence during a time of great political unrest, a period that ultimately ended with his tragic death in the underground passages that once connected his home to the geothermal pool Snorralaug. This stone-lined pool, fed by natural hot springs, is a replica of Iceland's oldest preserved structures and one of its earliest protected archaeological sites.

Reykholt continues to thrive as a vibrant cultural destination. The renowned Reykholt Chamber Music Festival, held annually, attracts international artists and audiences. This event reflects the area's enduring status as a hub of artistic and intellectual activity, seamlessly blending the past and present through performance and community engagement. The historic centre in Reykholt has steadfastly maintained the significance of the saga tradition over generations. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the cultural mapping process uncovered a wealth of living storytellers, who form an integral part of the region's rich cultural fabric.

Iceland is known for its abundance of hot springs, and geothermal pools have become increasingly popular for both relaxation and tourism. In the Borgarfjörður district, geothermal energy is harnessed not only for electricity and heating homes and pools, but also to support extensive greenhouse horticulture, significantly boosting local food production. Deildartunguhver, the most powerful hot spring in Europe by volume, feeds the Krauma geothermal complex, where pools made of natural stone are heated entirely by geothermal energy. Nearby, the Giljaböðin pools offer a more secluded bathing experience in a peaceful setting near Húsafell, on the edge of the central highlands. Húsafell has long been a cherished destination for Icelanders and visitors alike, offering



summer cottages, woodlands, rivers, and striking views of the Langjökull glacier. The area also serves as a base for a variety of outdoor adventures, including snowmobiling, glacier hiking, and guided ice cave tours within Langjökull itself. Visitors can explore the vast expanse of the glacier by skidoo or specially modified vehicles, entering a network of man-made tunnels carved deep into the ice. These activities provide a rare opportunity to experience the glacier from the inside and gain a unique perspective on Iceland's dynamic natural environment. Hiking trails, lava fields, and waterfalls such as Hraunfossar and Barnafoss add to the region's appeal, making it one of the country's most diverse nature destinations.

One of the most popular attractions near Húsafell is Surtshellir, a large lava cave known for its dramatic geology, including impressive stalactites and stalagmites. The cave is frequently visited by those interested in Iceland's volcanic formations, but it has also served as an unconventional venue for artistic expression. In 1994, artist Páll Guðmundsson held a pioneering exhibition inside the cave, using the stark natural setting to present his sculptures in dialogue with the raw landscape. The project earned national recognition in 1995 for its originality and its powerful use of place.

Páll Guðmundsson is one of Iceland's most respected living artists and an integral figure in the Húsafell community (Figure 3.4). He is both a



**FIGURE 3.4.**  
Páll Guðmundsson  
illuminating his wall of faces,  
carved from local Húsafell  
stone. Photo: Anna Hildur  
Hildibrandsdóttir

lifelong resident and a member of the family that owns and manages the Húsafell estate, making his presence in the area deeply rooted and enduring. His work is inseparable from the environment around him, often using local stone as both medium and message. Known especially for his carved stone faces, Páll brings human expression into natural materials, transforming rock into visual poetry. Through his artistic vision, community involvement, and deep connection to place, Páll Guðmundsson has become a living expression of Húsafell's cultural landscape. His work draws on Icelandic mythology, natural form, and local memory, offering visitors and locals alike a chance to experience art that is truly embedded in the land.

Following the Surtshellir exhibition, Páll began collaborating with the Icelandic band Sigur Rós. Their shared performance inside the cave, featuring Páll's stone harp (steinharpa), merged sculpture and sound in a way that resonated deeply with Iceland's elemental aesthetic. This creative partnership eventually led to the formation of *Hrafnagaldur*, a multidisciplinary project that brought together Páll, the band Sigur Rós, and the late rímur chanter Steindór Andersen. The project combined traditional Icelandic chant with post-rock soundscapes and visual art rooted in the Icelandic landscape. It remains a powerful example of how contemporary creativity can emerge from, and engage with, ancient traditions and nature.

## Snæfellsnes Peninsula

The Snæfellsnes Peninsula, on the western edge of the region, has long been shaped by the rhythms of fishing, small-town life, and the imposing presence of its natural landscapes. Volcanic activity, glaciers, and the proximity of the sea have carved out a place where settlements remain closely tied to the land. While the fishing industry continues to



play a significant role, Snæfellsnes also offers a space where nature, history, and cultural traditions are deeply connected.

Snæfellsjökull National Park, established in 2001, was created to safeguard the peninsula's distinctive scenery, ecosystems, and cultural landmarks. Covering 183 square kilometres, the park brings together volcanic formations, coastal erosion, and the glacier that has become an enduring symbol of the region. Snæfellsjökull has long captured the imagination of writers and travellers. During the Romantic era, it was often portrayed as a site of mystery and natural grandeur. That reputation was later reinforced through literature, most notably when French writer Jules Verne chose Snæfellsjökull as the entry point in *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864), placing the glacier firmly within a broader narrative of exploration and wonder.

In Hellissandur and Rif, situated at the peninsula's edge, new cultural dimensions have emerged. The Speak Out initiative revealed how artistic perspectives on Snæfellsnes significantly altered the viewpoints of officials and academics. Notably, artists shared how the unique light conditions on Snæfellsnes, combined with the glacier and open sea, created a magical atmosphere that has inspired a considerable number of visual artists to settle in Hellissandur and art residencies to be established. Focus groups pinpointed that public art, like the murals in Hellissandur, has revitalised the town, drawing visitors:

*These artworks foster local pride by reflecting the town's culture and promoting its activities. Residents, in turn, help spread this positive message, generating interest and conversation.*

In Rif, a former freezer plant was converted in 2014 into a theatre and a cultural hub known as Frystiklefinn, or The Freezer. This initiative has drawn artists from abroad and contributed to a growing tradition of visual arts that responds directly to the surrounding landscape, the captivating lighting conditions shaped by the interplay between the vast

ocean and the glacier. Murals, performances, and small exhibitions have become an integral part of the community's cultural fabric, in dialogue with the enduring influence of the glacier. A focus group in Snæfellsbær highlighted Kári Viðarsson's initiative as a catalyst for community development. The group emphasised that a strong entrepreneurial spirit has been transformative, and the entrepreneur's ability to engage stakeholders—business owners, government officials, and residents—expedited the reconstruction process significantly. However, risk analysis identifies entrepreneurial fatigue as a key threat to the region's cultural vitality.

Stykkishólmur stands out as a picturesque Icelandic town, distinguished by its captivating location and attractive architecture. As the largest settlement on the peninsula, it preserves historical connections to Breiðafjörður and the Westfjords, having been a significant trading hub in earlier periods. The presence of French Catholic sisters in the late nineteenth century contributed to a broader cultural exchange, traces of which remain visible today. Contemporary art continues to shape the town's identity, most notably through Roni Horn's *Library of Water* in the town's former library, an installation where glacier water is held in glass columns, exploring the connection between language, weather, and memory. Words describing atmospheric conditions are etched into the floors in both Icelandic and English, reinforcing the intimate relationship between the environment and human experience.

The Norwegian house (no date), the first two-storey residential building in Iceland, built in 1832 using pre-fabricated timber from Norway, is the home of the Regional Museum of the Snæfellsnes peninsula. The museum's core exhibition, "Heart's Place – The Horizon through the Eyes of Young People on Snæfellsnes from 1900," explores the perspectives of local youth on their environment and connection to their homeland, incorporating the region's history. The attic houses an open storage area displaying items from across Snæfellsnes. The ground floor

features rotating exhibitions in the Milk Room and Kitchen, showcasing the area's arts, culture, and history as well as a museum shop. The Norwegian house is also a venue for numerous events, exhibitions, and gatherings of the townspeople and the local community in the present.

Before the establishment of the national park, Stykkishólmur had already emerged as a cultural and historical point of interest. While tourism infrastructure elsewhere on the peninsula has altered visitor patterns, the town has adapted, although it no longer sees as many visitors as it once did:

*Having lived here for 18 years, I have observed that people in Snæfellsnes are realising that tourism is a business. Snæfellsbær is a high-paying area with a fishing industry that for a long time had no interest in serving any tourists. But this attitude has changed and meanwhile, we in Stykkishólmur have not stepped up our game and adjusted to these changes.*

Our focus group analysis also noted a decline in social participation, with younger generations being less likely to engage in voluntary activities unless they are paid. As a result, town festivals, which were once intended to attract visitors, now focus on providing enjoyable cultural experiences for local families. Special events, such as the Júlíana Literary Festival and the Skotthúfan Folk Costume Festival, have also enriched the community's cultural life. More recently, the travelling Pride festival, Hinsegin Vesturland, held annually since 2021, has added another dimension to the local festival landscape of the region.

While many features of Snæfellsnes continue to draw attention, it is Kirkjufell, the mountain rising above Grundarfjörður, that has become especially prominent. Its striking shape and surrounding landscape have made it a visual landmark, further popularised through its appearance in the television series *Game of Thrones*. Yet beyond its cinematic fame, Kirkjufell remains part of a larger landscape shaped by centuries of human settlement, storytelling, and adaptation.

## Dalabyggð

Dalabyggð or Dalir, as it is commonly known, is the northernmost district of West Iceland, a traditional farming community centred on the village of Búðardalur. The village remains the main service hub for a sparsely populated area of roughly 650 inhabitants, where daily life still revolves around agriculture, particularly sheep farming. In recent years, however, the district has faced the dual pressures of depopulation and fragile infrastructure, prompting local authorities to secure support through national and regional development funds. These initiatives, framed under the DalaAuður programme, have not only helped sustain farming livelihoods but also encouraged a wider spectrum of projects: upgrading housing, strengthening digital and energy networks, and fostering cultural vitality. Grassroots funding has played a central role in this renewal, supporting more than 60 community projects since 2022. While some initiatives focus on forestry, food innovation, and tourism, many celebrate Dalabyggð's cultural heritage, from saga-inspired theatre and local choirs to public art, literature, and the preservation of historic sites. Such efforts underline how deeply culture is interwoven with everyday life in the valleys. As one focus group noted,

*In Dalabyggð, sheep farming is not merely an industry but a way of life and a cornerstone of the local culture, engaging nearly everyone. This occupation shapes all work, making it impossible to plan anything in May or September that doesn't directly involve the sheep.*

The community's challenge is therefore twofold: to protect and adapt its agricultural base while also building new forms of resilience—cultural, social, and infrastructural—that can sustain Dalabyggð into the future.

The district is deeply rooted in Iceland's historical imagination. It is the setting of *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, which tells the story of early settlers between the eighth and tenth centuries. Remarkably, many of

the farms mentioned in the saga are still standing today. Among the most notable sites is Eiríksstaðir, the ancestral home of Erik the Red. Today, the farm operates as a living history museum, offering a window into the world of Iceland's initial generation of settlers.

Innovation in Dalabyggð continues at the intersection of farming and culture. Farms such as Erpsstaðir have expanded traditional dairy production by developing new artisan products while linking food production to local narratives. This approach blends agricultural heritage with contemporary creativity, strengthening the bond between place and community life.

One of Dalabyggð's most celebrated cultural figures is the poet Jóhannes úr Kötlum, who grew up at Ljárskógarsel. He was a master of the traditional Icelandic poetic forms known as *bragarhættir*—metres that were once widely used across Northern Europe and the British Isles. While these poetic forms largely fell out of use elsewhere during the Middle Ages, they have endured in Icelandic literature and continue to influence poetry to this day.

Jóhannes's mastery of the old style allowed him to call across centuries to medieval poets such as Snorri Sturluson and beyond the settlement. Yet Jóhannes was equally at home among the modern Atom Poets, whose works redefined Icelandic literature in the twentieth century. His 1932 poem about the Yule Lads, "Jólasveinarnir," has become an essential part of Icelandic Christmas traditions. The collection it appears in, *Jólin*

**FIGURE 3.5.** The entrance to Erpsstaðir farm in Dalabyggð, where local folklore is blended with artisan dairy production. Photo: Anna Hildur Hildibrandsdóttir



*koma*, remains the best-selling book in Icelandic publishing history. Today, the spirit of Jóhannes' poetry lives on, as the Yule Lads are being reimagined through community projects, with farms like Erpsstaðir helping to link folklore to contemporary cultural life (Figure 3.5).

Artist residencies are also developing in the district, offering space for creative dialogue between new voices and an old landscape. One notable initiative is at Nýp in Skarðsströnd, a coastal settlement that hosts artists and entrepreneurs interested in sustainable practices and cultural heritage. Skarðsströnd to the north and Fellströnd to the south form part of what is often called the "Saga Circle of Iceland," a landscape layered with memory and myth. A monument to Auður the Deep-Minded, one of *Laxdæla saga*'s best-known settlers, was erected at Fellströnd in 1965. It stands today as a quiet marker of how the sagas continue to shape Dalabyggð's sense of place and identity.

## Conclusion

In West Iceland, stories are not confined to the pages of history. They are part of the living fabric of the land, woven through landscapes, communities, and the everyday lives of people who continue to draw meaning from them. These stories, shaped across centuries, remind us that our individual and collective identity is built through the narratives we inherit, reimagine, and pass on. They teach us how we perceive ourselves, how we understand the places we belong to, and how we relate to the wider world.

In our region, we have seen how the sagas, poetry, art, and evolving traditions of West Iceland form a cultural symphony where past and present meet. The power of these narratives lies not only in their preservation but in their renewal and reimagination as they inspire innovation, resilience, and create multilayered growth. The journey

across West Iceland reveals that cooperation, collaboration, and network-building are not new ideals, but the foundations upon which survival and community have always rested. Whether among early settlers braving an unknown land or among today's communities finding new ways to strengthen their future, the spirit of working together remains essential.

While the culture of fishing communities appears less tied to early settlement history and the sagas than that of agricultural communities, where a sense of history seems stronger, a common thread of active participation in choirs, amateur theatre groups, and craftwork characterises the entire region. These cultural pursuits, while perhaps not originating from the settlement era, possess a long-standing history and serve as vital cultural activities that strengthen community bonds.

The Regional Plans of Action have enhanced regional cooperation and the relationship between local government and residents. Within the West Iceland IN SITU Lab, research has revealed a greater need for cooperation than currently exists. Individuals express a strong desire to shape their communities through active participation in both work and leisure. While a system for government-resident dialogue is in place, our cultural mapping work indicates that residents are an underutilised resource in the region. When asked about the role of community collaborations in fostering the growth of the culture and creative industries in the region, focus groups highlighted the impact of community collaborations, citing the establishment of museums, exhibitions, and cultural centres in West Iceland as successful initiatives. This collaboration—which involves joint promotional activities; improves professional work, exhibition production, and research; and supports museums' educational outreach to schools and the public—is supported by The Regional Plans of Action. Nevertheless,

a notable gap exists in cross-collaboration efforts between different population centres within West Iceland, as one participant noted:

*There is a lot of work to be done regarding cooperation within the region. Many people live and work in their own corner, and residency is spread over a large area. There is diversity, many small communities within a larger region, and we need to look more closely at the region as a whole and work better and more closely together within it.*

As John Donne wrote, “No man is an island.” In West Iceland, every story, every landscape, and every shared effort becomes part of a greater whole. It is in this ongoing exchange—between individuals and communities, past and present—from which the identity of the region springs, offering a model for resilience, belonging, and collective creativity. Allowing the mind to linger in the panorama and take part in creation is essential. And so is a supportive system that provides an ability for physical infrastructure to follow. This allows the collective to travel into the future. And that takes more than a village. It takes the entire region.

## Acknowledgements

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**FIGURE 4.1.**

Map of the Western coastal periphery IN SITU Lab, Ireland, with main centres, connections, and meaningful places. Map developed by Mollu Heino in collaboration with the Ireland Lab team.



4

# **Galway:** Culture in place

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As Galwegians, we are often bemused at hearing that Galway “punches above its weight” when it comes to telling its creative and cultural story. The story of a cultural Galway has many starting points, they vary from the shadows cast by the Connemara mountains, to the cheap rent of a four-bedroom house in the centre of town in the 1980s, the cash that flowed from multinational corporations in the 1990s, or the 540 different types of rain that lash down on it in one day.

What is behind the story of culture and creativity in Galway? The short answer: Place.

Anyone who knows big ‘C’ culture knows that it inhabits places differently. We are used to the idea that place, in the form of soil and climate, influences how grapes grow. We then know that the kind of wine that is made from those grapes is very different in Bordeaux, France, than it is in the Huasco Valley, Chile. It is the same for big ‘C’-culture as it is for viti-culture, indeed, agri-culture. The climatic factors influence the type of culture that is made. In this chapter, we make the case for how the climate (the human and physical climate) has influenced the kind of Culture that Galway has become known for. In doing so we take in Galway’s geology and its myth and folklore, its literature and music, its theatres and festivals. And we traverse the ancient and the contemporary to arrive at dreams for the future.

## Galway’s place: The geological canvas

Let us first consider the story of Galway as one comprising two halves. The geological makeup of the region acts as the stage upon which a place has

emerged (see Figure 4.1). That place is not made of the buildings, bridges, roads, or railways, but of the people and the stories they have told. Stories that have been inspired by the place, stories that have emerged despite the place, stories that could not have existed without the place. So we start with the understanding that the landscape is a storyscape. The feedback and the connection between the two is a constant pulse.

Galway's landscapes bear the traits of ancient transformations, an often disgruntled dialogue between time and stone that continues to shape the region's identity. Beneath the hard stoney hills and rugged shores lies a geological narrative, a tragicomedy that has been a hundred million years in the writing. In the west, angularly angry mountains shimmer with purpley-green veins of Connemara marble. This beauty was born of intense heat and pressure in the Precambrian past. Used in churches, monuments, and intricate jewellery, this stone has become a tangible connection between place and culture. Yet in it we see both beauty and tragedy. The grey green veneer speaks of a landscape that bore little else in terms of natural bounty. The land from under which it was ripped is a stony one that couldn't support a growing population. On the sleek marble we see the tears of mothers who said goodbye to their children as they made for a life in the new world, for their descendants to return and purchase a little bit of it for a keyring that they might show their friends in Minnesota or Middlesbrough.

Eastward, the landscape softens into the karstic limestone plains, where water has spent millennia sculpting an intricate underworld. Hidden rivers and seasonal turloughs emerge and vanish in a quiet rhythm, echoing the cycles of life for those who dwell above. This interplay of rock and water is more than a natural phenomenon; it is an enduring metaphor in Galway's culture, inspiring tales of resilience in the face of nature's caprice.

It is this mix of hard and soft rock that helps tell the story of how the stories of Galway have come to be. Both of these stones collide at the

juncture where the mighty Corrib river meets the might of the Atlantic Ocean. It is at that juncture where most of the people of Galway call home, where a unique urban settlement has grown, one that has been defined by the stones, stories, and storytellers to the east and to the west. Galway city has the ability to play that cute trick of presenting itself as a city while not being a city at all. Throughout this book we are using the moniker of non-urban as a relational field—an ensemble of hinterland ties, seasonal flows, and community infrastructures. It is through that cultural production is organised; in the case of Galway, the “city” appears here less as bounded form than as a switching point in a wider coastal-rural circuit of making, hosting, and remembering. As Ireland’s fourth largest settlement, it stands as a city in the national conversation, but with a population of just over 80,000 it is a town in international rankings. This is an important dualism in the non-urban context, one that sees places become city by fact of their relative context, but when viewed from a remove do not abide by key identifiers of the urban.

This balancing act is not unique to Galway. Many of the places we examine in this book occupy a similar threshold space—urban, but not metropolitan; central within their own region, but marginal in wider European imaginaries. These are functioning small cities and towns with distinct cultural ecologies. They have their own theatres, festivals, collectives, creative infrastructure—but lack the gravitational pull of capitals or major metropolises. In this way, our framing of “non-urban” includes such places not because they lack urban form, but because they lack metropolitan dominance. Their peripherality is relational, not absolute. It lies in how they are perceived and positioned within national and continental hierarchies of culture, investment, and influence.

Water is as important as stone in understanding Galway. It comes in all shapes, including Ireland’s largest lake to the north and the river that connects it to the city and the ocean. Its flow was augmented by previous generations, the Monks of Newcastle cutting a new segment through

the marshes in an effort to shave time off a commute. The building of the Salmon Weir tells a story of how the use of the river had changed in the nineteenth century, from main thoroughfare to leisurely pursuit (if you could afford a license to pursue). The canals of the city talk to an attempt at industrialisation that no one really believed in, but they also mark a paltry attempt to make up for a type of colonial mismanagement that verged on the edge of genocide.

Nowhere is a sense of rugged majesty more palpable than in Connemara, where the Twelve Bens rise like ancient guardians. Their quartzite peaks shimmer under skies that are never the same from one minute to the next, their stark beauty mirrored in the lives shaped by this untamed terrain. Here, the Irish language flourishes, nurtured by a landscape that demands reflection and creativity. The valleys and peat bogs, sculpted by glaciers long vanished, carry the weight of history, inviting a deeper connection to the land and its stories. For Oscar Wilde, it is a savage type of beauty on show – time spent in it can invigorate and send shivers down your spine.

Along the shores of Galway Bay, the county meets the Atlantic with drama and grace. The jagged limestone pavements of the Aran Islands seem to hold the memory of ancient seas, their surfaces weathered into patterns that evoke both wonder and mystery. This coastline, where rock meets ocean, has shaped generations of fishermen and storytellers alike. Its tidal rhythms infuse daily life, while its vast horizons inspire myths of transformation and the unknown. Here too the tragic and the dramatic collide. The sea that gives, also takes. Lives lost to watery deaths, journeys enforced on travellers that never return.

Traces of the last Ice Age ripple across the landscape, most notably in the drumlin fields of south Galway. These rolling hills, little reminders of the massive glaciers that crossed the land, cradle the county's food basket. The drumlins, like frozen waves, are silent witnesses to the earth's slow and steady transformations. Upon them, farmers have sown



**FIGURE 4.2.**  
Diamond Hill,  
Connemara National  
Park (Co. Galway): the  
quartzite and bogland  
uplands that shape  
Connemara's texture—  
and Galway's cultural  
imagination. Photo:  
Mark Marnell

fields and built homes, eked out a living, and for a significant part of its history, a living for a landlord in a different country. Still culture as agriculture grew in harmony with the land's ancient designs.

So, the physical landscape is woven deeply into Galway's cultural fabric. The distinctive green of Connemara marble is not just a geological marvel; it is a cultural emblem,

adorning cathedral pillars and treasured keepsakes. Mining, too, has left its mark. From the iron deposits of Eyrecourt to the lead veins of Tynagh, Galway's underground wealth has shaped the livelihoods and imaginations of its people, tying their fortunes to the ancient processes that forged the county's bedrock.

In places like Knockmaa Hill, geology and mythology converge. The limestone caves and karstic features of this landscape hold not only the weight of millions of years but also the intangible stories of Queen Maeve and the fairy folk said to dwell there. Such places are cultural anchors, where the physical and the mythical entwine. They remind us that Galway's landscapes are more than just a canvas shaped by time—they are also vessels for stories, carrying the past into the present.

Through this interplay of rock and culture, of ancient forces and human ingenuity, Galway's geography has become more than a physical form. It is a living presence, shaping the people who call it home and inspiring the art, stories, and traditions that define its spirit. As time flows on, the landscapes of Galway continue to hold their quiet dominion, offering a sense of place that is as enduring as the rocks beneath our feet.



## Galway and the culture of a place

### Myths, folklore, and place

The landscape of Galway, with its shifting moods, has long held the power to shape not only its geography but also its stories. Stones and rivers are the touchpoint of myths, traces of ancient wonder that act as the connection between the physical and the spiritual (see Figure 4.2).

The River Gaillimh, from which the region takes its name, bisects the region and flows through the heart of Galway's earliest tale. It is said to be named after 'Gaillimh iníon Breasail', the daughter of a Fir Bolg chieftain. The Fir Bolg, an ancient people of Ireland, are central figures in the mythic cycles of Irish history (said to hail from Greece). They were said to be masters of the land, bringing the first culture in the form of agriculture to a wild and untamed Ireland. In this tale, Gaillimh drowned in the river, her name carried by the waters and immortalised in the landscape. The Corrib river's path became the lifeblood of the city, solidifying the connection between geography and identity; the river a physical boundary and a cultural anchor.

The lake from which the river flows, Lough Corrib, is a vast and shimmering expanse of water that reflects both sky and story. Legends tell of a great well, overflowing in a torrent, carving out the lake. This tale not only explains the lake's creation but also speaks to the transformative power of water in shaping the land. Lough Corrib, with its scattered islands and surrounding hills, has inspired poets, artists, and storytellers for centuries. It remains a sanctuary of both nature and narrative, its surface carrying the weight of history while its depths hold the secrets of its origins.

On its shores, one of the great tales unfolds: the pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne, lovers fleeing the wrath of Fionn mac Cumhaill. Their flight

across Ireland left its mark on Galway, where local landmarks are tied to their journey. The rugged terrain of Connemara, with its craggy peaks and hidden glens, offers the perfect backdrop for their romance and tragedy. These lands, shaped by the grinding ice of ancient glaciers, seem to hold their breath, as if still bearing witness to the lovers' desperate escape. The geology of the region, raw and untamed, mirrors the intensity of the tale, where love and loss are etched into the very stones.

Farther west, where the horizon meets the Atlantic, lies the realm of Hy-Brasil, the mythical island of enchantment. In Galway's folklore, Hy-Brasil is a ghostly land seen only once every seven years, rising briefly before vanishing back into the sea. Gerald Griffin (1857) describes:

*On the ocean that hollows the rocks where ye dwell  
A shadowy land has appeared, as they tell:  
Men thought it a region of sunshine and rest,  
And they called it Hy-Brasil...*

The rugged coastline of Galway, battered by tides and shrouded in mist, creates the perfect setting for such a legend. This illusion of an island (logged in Dutch maps from the 1600s), ephemeral and unreachable. Hy-Brasil, in its transience, echoes the shifting sands of human imagination, rooted in the reality of the Atlantic's ceaseless movement.

The Aran Islands, shaped by geological forces over millennia, remain places where the tangible and the intangible meet—a sanctuary for both stone and spirit. For J. M. Synge (1907), “a universe that wars with wind and sea”; “a strange sense of exile and desolation.” Back on the mainland, the hawthorn tree holds its place as a sentinel of Galway's folklore (see Figure 4.3). Often found standing alone in the fields or along winding country roads, these solitary trees are said to mark the homes of fairies. To cut one down is to risk incurring their wrath—a belief so strong that farmers will plough around a hawthorn rather than disturb it. In the rolling landscapes of Galway, where drumlins rise and fall like the waves of a frozen sea, the

hawthorn's presence is a vivid reminder of the respect for the natural world that courses through Irish tradition. It is a superstition deeply rooted in the geography, where the isolation of these trees mirrors the rugged solitude of the land itself.

Knockmaa Hill, near Tuam, towers over the surrounding plains, its summit cloaked in stories of Finvarra, the fairy king of Connacht. Here, in a palace beneath the earth, he is said to hold court, his queen Oonagh by his side. The hill, with its ancient cairns and burial mounds, speaks to a time when the boundaries between the human and the divine were fluid. The landscape itself seems imbued with their presence; the winds that sweep across its slopes carry the echoes of fairy revelries, while the hill's commanding height offers a view that feels both worldly and otherworldly. In Galway, the very shape of the land invites such tales, transforming hills and valleys into vessels for myth.

In Galway, geography is never just a backdrop—it is a participant, a creator, and a keeper of stories. The myths of this place, shaped by the contours of its hills, the depths of its lakes, and the reach of its shores, are as enduring as the land itself. They remind us that the physical world is more than a collection of features—it is a living, breathing presence, a canvas for the imagination, and a bridge between the seen and the unseen. In every stone and stream, Galway's myths live on, their echoes carried on the wind and etched into the earth.

In these stories, we see how the physical world gives birth to the mythical, how the land itself becomes a vessel for memory and



**FIGURE 4.3.**  
Hawthorn Tree shaped  
by the wind. Photo:  
Patrick Collins

meaning, the true essence of Culture. Rivers, islands, and shores are not merely features of the terrain but living characters in the drama of Galway's stories. They remind us that geography shapes not just the body of a place but also its soul, binding the past to the present in ways as enduring as the rocks and rivers themselves.

## **Music and the bardic tradition**

The music of Galway is as ancient and enduring as its landscapes, a soundscape shaped by stone and sea, echoing the rhythms of its hills, rivers, and shores. Long before sessions lit up the smoky corners of pubs, music was woven into the daily life of Galway's people—a thread that connected communities, marked the passage of time, and gave voice to the unspoken.

In the early centuries, music in Galway was inseparable from the Bardic tradition. The bards, revered as poets, historians, and musicians, roamed the land, carrying their harps across the rugged terrain. They were custodians of memory, their compositions preserving lineage, lore, and the pulse of the landscape. The harp, a symbol now synonymous with Ireland itself, would have resonated in the great halls of the Gaelic chieftains who ruled over Galway's clans. Take “Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire,” a lament attributed to Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, capturing the profound sorrow of loss, its mournful tones reminiscent of the winds that sweep through Galway's hills.

Geography played its role as muse. The mountains of Connemara, rising like the spines of some ancient creature, gave rise to laments that seemed to echo their solitude. The fertile plains of east Galway, dotted with villages and farmsteads, inspired lively reels and jigs. “The Humours of Tulla” reel, a tune rooted in the traditions of east Galway and Clare, evokes the buoyant spirit of rural gatherings. The rhythms of these tunes mirrored the work of hands in the fields and the joy of

harvest celebrations, each note grounded in the land's cycles of labour and festivity.

The River Corrib, with its swift currents, was a lifeline for the city and its hinterlands, and its flowing waters carried songs of migration, love, and loss. “An Raibh Tú ag an gCarraig,” a haunting sean-nós song, is deeply tied to Ireland's cultural memory and reflects the themes of longing and resilience so central to Galway's musical heritage. The melody itself, winding like the river's path, captures the ebb and flow of life on its banks.

By the medieval period, Galway's position as a port city brought it into contact with a world beyond Ireland's shores. Trade routes to Spain, France, and the wider Celtic world enriched its musical traditions, introducing new instruments, forms, and styles. The interplay of local traditions with these external influences created a distinctive musical dialect. Tunes such as “The Salamanca Reel” hint at the cultural exchanges between Galway's sailors and continental Europe, their travels leaving musical traces in the county's evolving repertoire.

The Claddagh, the fishing village nestled at Galway's edge, was another cradle of musical heritage. Here, songs of the sea were born—melancholic airs that spoke of longing and the perils of the ocean, and joyous shanties that celebrated safe returns. Peigin Leitir Móir, a sean-nós song associated with the region, captures the daily life of Galway's coastal communities, blending the realities of the sea with the poetic cadence of its people's voices.

During the Penal Laws of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, music and song became acts of quiet resistance. The uilleann pipes, fiddles, and flutes carried the stories of a people, their notes defying attempts to erase them. In Galway, the rugged geography provided a sanctuary for these traditions—a place where the music could endure, nurtured by the resilience of its people and the shelter of its hills.

## Culture, politics, and place

Galway's streets, shaped by medieval twists and Renaissance grandeur, have long provided fertile ground for the creative spirit. Beyond its stone walls and winding alleys lies a history of cultural resistance—one that forged a vision of Irishness through the arts, even as the weight of colonial forces sought to suppress it. Here, amidst the rugged landscapes and the echoes of the Atlantic, the seeds of Irish theatre and literature were planted, growing into a movement that would help define a nation.

In the sixteenth century, Galway's prosperity as a trading hub fostered the rise of an English merchant class who sought to build an idealised city behind their walls. Yet, beyond those walls lay a different world—the native Irish, their language and traditions alive, despite the attempts to marginalise them. It was from this tension, between inclusion and exclusion, that Galway's unique cultural identity emerged. The very geography of the city—its peripherality yet connection to the wider world through the port—created a space where cultural exchange, resilience, and creativity flourished.

Theatre found its early roots in Galway's streets and halls, where travelling troupes and local performers would captivate audiences. By the time Wolfe Tone performed on Kirwan's Lane, the stage had already become a site of both entertainment and subtle rebellion. This tradition deepened in the nineteenth century, as Galway became a focus for the Irish literary revival. The peripherality of the West, with its myths, languages, and landscapes, became a potent symbol of an Ireland untouched by colonial modernity.

The theatre and literature of Galway, grounded in its geography and shaped by its history, became instruments of transformation. They were not only expressions of resistance but also acts of creation, forging a cultural identity that could stand independent of colonial definitions. Yet, what makes Galway's cultural contribution particularly compelling is its role in shaping the direction of the entire nation. The West, as a

periphery, became not merely a mirror but a lens through which Ireland could imagine its own independence and future.

Galway's culture, rooted in its landscape and the traditions of its people, carried a voice that was both distinct and resonant. The peripherality of the region, its distance from the colonial centres of Dublin and London, allowed it to develop an identity that was not beholden to those powers. Instead, it drew on its own resources—its myths, its language, and its unique history of survival and creativity. This distance provided the space for experimentation and critical reflection, making Galway a crucible for ideas that would resonate across the country.

The theatre of the Irish literary revival, much of it inspired by Galway's landscapes and stories, offered a new way of understanding Irishness. The works of J. M. Synge, Lady Augusta Gregory, and Ireland's first President Douglas Hyde did not shy away from the complexities and contradictions of rural Ireland. They depicted a land that was beautiful and brutal, a people who were resilient yet vulnerable, and a culture that was rich yet fragile. In doing so, they provided a counter-narrative to the romanticised vision of Ireland that had dominated nationalist rhetoric. This was not an Ireland of idealised peasants and unbroken traditions; it was a living, breathing place, full of conflict, transformation, and potential.

This complexity was crucial in shaping the cultural foundations of the independence movement. Galway's stories and plays reminded a nation in the throes of colonial suppression that its identity was far older and deeper than the narratives imposed by external powers. They offered a vision of a people who could endure and adapt, who could draw strength from their history without being trapped by it. The productions staged in Galway and inspired by it became a rallying cry, uniting communities in their shared heritage and their collective imagination of a free Ireland.

Likely one of the most famous of cultural contributors with a Galway connection is Nobel Laureate William Butler Yeats. Yeats's fascination with the mythical was not merely an aesthetic choice but a deliberate invocation of a pre-colonial Celtic Ireland. The tales of the Tuatha Dé Danann, the warrior Cú Chulainn, and the Otherworld of the 'sídhe' informed his vision of a nation rooted in its own distinct traditions. In works like *The Wanderings of Oisín*, Yeats resurrected these myths, drawing parallels between their otherworldly journeys and Ireland's search for self-determination. This turn toward mythology was both a reclamation of a cultural heritage suppressed under British rule and a tool for envisioning a future shaped by Ireland's own values and stories.

Coole Park in County Galway was not only a site of literary creation but also a gathering place for the leaders of the Revival. Lady Gregory, Yeats, and figures like Edward Martyn and Douglas Hyde met here to discuss how Ireland's cultural past could inform its future. Their work was deeply intertwined with the Arts and Crafts movement, which sought to revive traditional forms of art, craftsmanship, and storytelling as a response to the alienating effects of industrialisation and colonial modernity. Galway, with its rich traditions of stone carving, weaving, and metalwork, became a natural home for this movement, and Coole Park was its heart.

The Arts and Crafts movement in Galway celebrated the handmade, the local, and the mythic. Its practitioners looked to the patterns of early Celtic art—spirals, knots, and interlaced designs—as symbols of continuity and resilience. These motifs found their way into stained glass, tapestries, and book illustrations, creating a visual language that complemented the Revival's literary output. At the same time, the movement's ethos of collaboration and community echoed the social structures of pre-colonial Ireland, offering a model for an independent nation built on shared values rather than imposed hierarchies.

For Yeats, the mythical and the crafted were inseparable from the political. In drawing from the Celtic past, he sought to create a vision of Ireland that



was both timeless and revolutionary. His plays, particularly those staged at the Abbey Theatre, often blended folklore with contemporary themes, using the stage as a platform to explore Ireland's identity and destiny. Cathleen Ní Houlihan, co-written with Lady Gregory, exemplifies this fusion. Set in a rural Irish cottage, the play invokes the mythical figure of Ireland as an old woman who inspires a young man to fight for her freedom. This blending of the personal, the mythical, and the political became a hallmark of Yeats's work and a cornerstone of the Revival.

In the decades following independence (1922), Galway's cultural output continued to influence the nation. Writers like Pádraic Ó Conaire, Liam O'Flaherty, and Máirtín Ó Cadhain brought the critical perspective of the West to the forefront of Irish literature. Writing in their own language, O'Conarie was the first to place the language amongst its European counterparts, pushing its boundaries through his postmodernist prose. The works of Liam O'Flaherty and Máirtín Ó Cadhain are steeped in the landscapes and languages of the West, both rejecting the homogenising forces of modernity and capitalism. For them, the rugged terrain of Connemara and the islands, with their unyielding beauty and deep cultural memory, stood in defiance of an emerging world order driven by profit and progress.

Both writers understood that Galway's geography—its remoteness, its ruggedness, its rootedness in tradition—offered a vantage point from which to critique the forces reshaping the world. Their works, deeply political yet profoundly human, used the particularities of Galway's landscape and culture to address universal themes of exploitation, resistance, and resilience.

In their rejection of modernity, they did not seek to preserve Galway as a museum piece, frozen in time. Rather, they sought to harness its unique cultural and geographical identity as a source of strength and a model for an alternative future. Their anti-modernist and anti-capitalist stances were not merely reactions against change but proposals for a

different kind of progress—one that honoured the land, the language, and the people who had shaped it.

Galway's geography, as much as its history, shaped the unique qualities of its cultural contribution. The Aran Islands, Connemara's rugged peaks, and the medieval streets of Galway city provided a backdrop that was both specific and universal. These landscapes inspired works that were deeply local yet spoke to the universal themes of survival, identity, and change. Galway's ability to see itself both as part of a wider world and as a place apart allowed it to act as a cultural bridge, connecting the global with the national and the local. It was this distinctiveness—the ability to speak from the periphery while addressing the centre—that made Galway's cultural output so influential. In imagining itself, Galway helped Ireland to imagine itself.

## Galway, a place made

Galway's cultural identity today remains a vivid expression of its geography, history, and unique place on the western edge of Europe. A city and county shaped by the Atlantic's restless rhythms, Galway has embraced its role as a cultural beacon, drawing deeply from its traditions while confidently engaging with the modern world. Its contemporary vibrancy, rooted in the land and language of its people, continues to challenge, inspire, and redefine what it means to be Irish while also extending outwards as a port of call to international visitors and influences.

On any given night in Galway centre a passerby will find live Irish Trad music at The Crane Bar, Tig Cóili, Taafes, or Carroll's. They might also hear live Brazilian, Spanish or American bluegrass music within other city pubs and bars. Out on the streets, throughout the day and night, buskers perform in front of shops and on street corners. There's an

eclectic mix of music being played, from drums to the fiddle and from the electric guitar to the tin whistle. Some of the buskers are local residents while others are staying in the city for a few weeks. Others are on a working holiday in Ireland, from afar afield as Canada or Japan, as they embed themselves in Galway's music and culture for a year. These same musicians might be found around the table at a Trad session in a pub that evening and the band playing on the corner of Quay Street and Cross Street may very well have a gig at Monroes or the Róisín Dubh later that night. On the streets and in the pubs it's as if Galway has its own soundtrack, combining the traditional and the contemporary, the local and the global.

The geography that shaped Galway's earliest traditions—its mountains, rivers, and coastal expanses—still resonates in its cultural production. The stories and songs carried on the winds of Connemara find new voices not only in the city's pubs, but also its theatres and studios, while the communal gatherings that once marked rural life are reflected in the festivals and events that animate its streets today. Galway's landscape, always a muse, now serves as a backdrop to a global conversation about creativity and identity.

Central to this conversation are Galway's transformative cultural movements, exemplified by Macnas (Figure 4.4) and the Galway International Arts Festival. Both have their roots in the city's commitment to collective creativity, drawing from the communal traditions of



**FIGURE 4.4.**  
Macnas parade, Galway:  
a large-scale puppet  
performance drawing  
spectators into the street.  
Photo: Patrick Collins

Ireland's west and the uniquely performative nature of Irish storytelling. These institutions do not merely showcase art and spectacle—they redefine it, taking the raw material of Galway's landscapes and history and transforming it into something powerfully contemporary.

Macnas, born in the 1980s, is a living embodiment of Galway's artistic ethos. Known internationally for its large-scale spectacles and parades, Macnas takes inspiration from Galway's mythical and physical landscapes. Its imaginative use of puppetry, pageantry, and storytelling brings ancient Irish traditions into the modern world, celebrating the myths and legends of the West while creating new ones. The streets of Galway become a theatre for these performances, with audiences immersed in a sensory experience that captures the wild energy of the Atlantic and the resilience of the land. Macnas reclaims the ancient art of communal storytelling, where the boundaries between performer and spectator dissolve, echoing the participatory nature of the region's cultural traditions.

The Galway International Arts Festival, established in 1978, similarly draws from Galway's geography and cultural heritage to create a globally renowned celebration of creativity. Over the decades, the festival has become a platform for local, national, and international artists, blending traditional Irish forms with cutting-edge global performances. Its interdisciplinary approach—spanning theatre, music, visual arts, and public spectacle—mirrors the multifaceted identity of Galway itself, a city that defies singular definition. Yet the festival's roots remain firmly planted in the west of Ireland, where its use of outdoor spaces and its incorporation of local stories and voices ground its international outlook in a deep sense of place.

Theatre also remains central to Galway's cultural narrative, with institutions like the Druid Theatre Company and Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe embodying the city's commitment to storytelling that is both local and universal. Founded in the 1970s, Druid pioneered a theatre

movement rooted in Irish narratives, performing works by writers such as Martin McDonagh and Tom Murphy, whose plays channel the tensions and transformations of rural and urban Ireland. Meanwhile, Taibhdhearc, as Ireland's national Irish-language theatre, stands as a testament to Galway's bilingual heritage and its dedication to preserving and innovating through the Irish language.



**FIGURE 4.5.**  
Galwegians assemble for the IN SITU Speak Out at Druid Theatre in Galway.  
Photo: Patrick Collins

While music and festivals may offer some of the most immediate and immersive encounters with Galway's cultural expression, there is a depth to the region's creative and cultural industries across an array of enterprises. A cultural mapping of the city and county's CCIs carried out by UrbanLab Galway in 2023 within the IN SITU project (Figure 4.5) highlighted their scale and importance as well as the wider social and economic contributions in terms of employment. Within the craft sector, electronic manufacturing is substantial in Galway City while Galway County has a significant focus on traditional crafts. Within the cultural industry the performing arts and education subsectors employ the most people in both city and county while software and app development are the largest employers in the city and county's creative industries. Importantly, the numbers represent a diversity of enterprises and considerable employment opportunities.

The organic culture on the streets and in the pubs and theatres doesn't easily map on to the craft, culture, and creative economic data provided through NACE codes but, taken together, we gain a broader and deeper

understanding of culture in Galway. It's a multi-layered ecosystem. It's a place alive with music, song, performance, visual arts and new technologies all of which form a robust creative economy that connects tradition and modernity.

## Culture mapped

The voices of Galway's creative practitioners are central to understanding the region's cultural climate. As part of the cultural mapping process, UrbanLab Galway facilitated focus groups with artists and local policymakers to reflect on the current creative ecosystem and imagine its future. These discussions surfaced both hope and frustration, underscoring the sector's strengths and fragilities.

Participants frequently emphasised Galway's landscape and people as foundational to its creative identity. "One of the best things about living in the west of Ireland," one said, "is that everyone is extremely strong and extremely tough... Life is challenging. But every time you go out after a terrible day, everyone is smiling." Galway's position as a site of convergence—where global influences meet local traditions—creates a dynamic cultural tension. It is a place of rootedness and transience: "People come and go," one participant remarked, reflecting on the difficulty of sustaining cohesive creative networks. And yet, the small scale of the city fosters ongoing collaborations: "You end up working with the same people again and again."

This duality—between cohesion and fragmentation, movement and permanence—lends Galway's cultural life its dynamism. Some initiatives fade quickly, while others, like Macnas and Druid Theatre, evolve from local amateur efforts into internationally recognised institutions.

In two focus groups, participants marked up maps of Galway City and County to identify places of inspiration and areas in need of support. The waterways of the city, Connemara's landscapes, and the coastline were frequently named as creative catalysts. While venues like the Druid Theatre and Galway Arts Centre cluster in the historic core, artistic activity was also identified on the city's peripheries (e.g., Shantalla, Doughiska) and in smaller towns like Tuam and Gort. The former, as the pilot site for Creative Places, has emerged as a rural creative hub. Gort, with its literary history and new artist-led initiatives like Gort Arts and small galleries, demonstrates the potential of community-driven culture.

Still, significant challenges persist. Infrastructure—both physical and institutional—was a recurring concern. Poor public transport, high studio rents, and limited exhibition space were seen as barriers to growth. In the absence of investment, participants feared Galway risked shifting from “culture making to culture taking” (Collins, 2023).

In an exercise imagining Galway 30 years into the future, creatives envisioned a city-region linked by sustainable transport: trams, water taxis, and cycling networks connecting established and emerging cultural spaces. Their visions reflected not fantasy, but a grounded belief that creative development is inseparable from broader infrastructure and policy planning.

## Conclusion

The ancient geologies and landscapes of Galway have given shape to a rich culture and tradition expressed in music and folklore, literature and performance. From the rugged hills and sandy beaches of Connemara to the waterways cutting of Galway City through to the rolling terrain of the eastern County, geography and culture continually intersect. The traditions that have arisen give shape to the present

and contemporary creative practices, which in turn, respond to and transform these traditions.

Galway, as we have suggested, is a sort of cultural beacon on the western edge of Ireland and Europe that not only continues to provide ways of understanding Irishness and national identity, but also extends beyond, to the world. Galway is a port of call, an attractor. Creative practitioners and audiences arrive from across Ireland, Europe and the world to witness and participate in the cultural scene. Galway therefore simultaneously turns inwards and outwards. It gives and receives. It is simultaneously deeply local and proudly global. It is such tensions that are at heart of its dynamic cultural and creative landscape, and indication that the periphery can also become a centre.

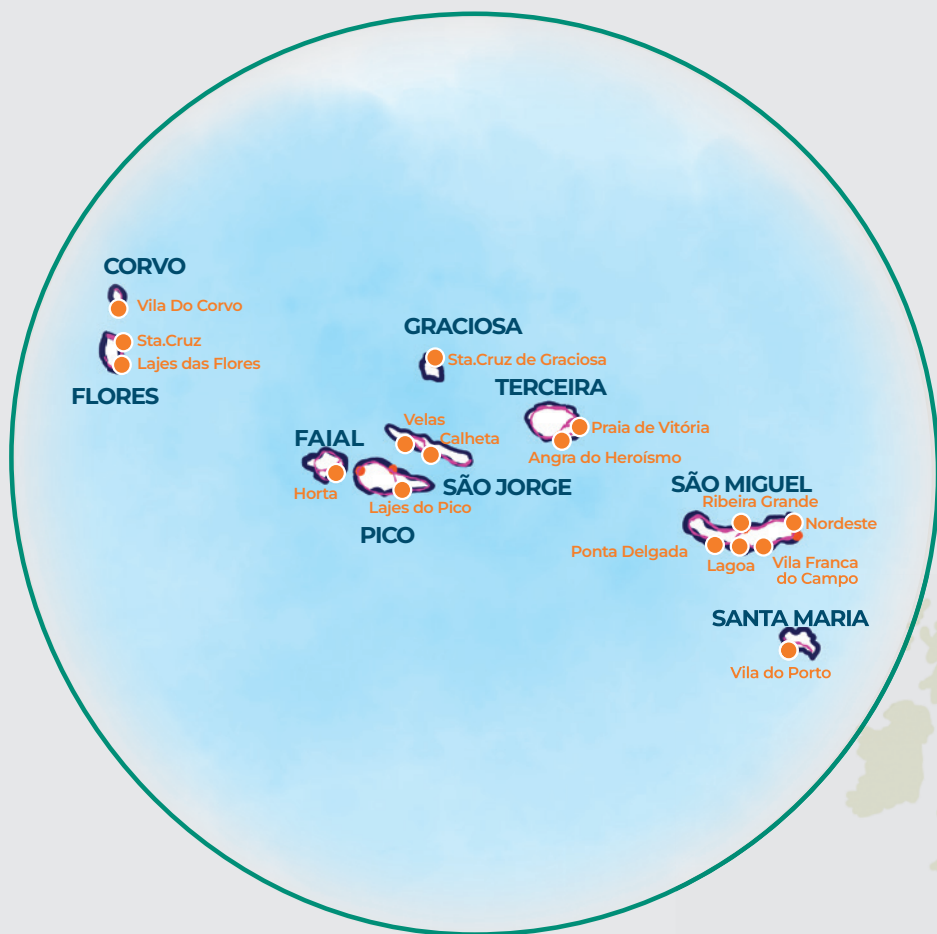
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**FIGURE 5.1.**

Map of the Azores archipelago  
IN SITU Lab, Portugal, with  
main centres, connections, and  
meaningful places. Map developed  
by Mollu Heino in collaboration with  
the Azores (Portugal) Lab team.



**5**

**Azores:**  
Cultivating  
creativity in  
an uncharted  
territory

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## The poetics of insularity: Geography, identity, and tradition in the Azores

The archipelago of the Azores is an autonomous region of Portugal, located 1500 km from the European mainland (see Figure 5.1), with its own regional government. Its position in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean between Europe and North America has made it a unique geostrategic spot since the time of the Portuguese Maritime Discoveries, when it played a central role in the sea routes between continents and cultures. At the same time, the smallness of the territory and the volcanic origin of the nine islands (see Figure 5.2), in which 230,000 people live,

bring to the surface scarcity issues and the fragility of existence. Both its history and geography have influenced cultural agency and governance in the course of time. Smallness and poverty combined to foster emigration and the autonomic ideal; natural characteristics and the volcanic origin shaped the

population's resilience and cultural expression. This chapter aims at portraying the present state of the cultural ecosystem in the Azorean archipelago within a diachronic perspective which helps to understand both the evolution that occurred in the sector in recent years and the

**FIGURE 5.2.**  
Interior of the Algar  
do Carvão volcanic  
chimney, Terceira  
Island (Azores). Photo:  
Beatriz Sousa, 2022



challenges inherent to small, peripheral places that persist and prove difficult to overcome.

As is usual on islands, the population experiences mixed feelings regarding the insular condition, ranging from an emotional attachment to the land and the desire to escape it, even if only by daydreaming about future possibilities when contemplating the horizon and imagining what lies ahead after crossing the ocean. Gaspar Frutuoso, an Azorean humanist of the sixteenth century, was one of the first writers to speak of this as a specific mark of Azorean identity. He saw a combination of similarities with the Portuguese tradition and the existence of specific features impressed by the climate, the geology, and the geography (Frutuoso, 2005 [1873]). Other writers followed him (Brandão, 2018 [1924]; Nemésio, 1932; Almeida, 1983; Luz, 2022; Nemésio, 2023), giving emphasis to the particularities embedded in the unique configuration of the archipelago. One of the most distinctive traits standing out in these writings is the contrast between colossal natural phenomena and the simplicity of lifestyle, alongside the deep religiousness of the population. Moreover, striking socioeconomic and power inequalities between the archipelago and the mainland have been keenly felt and led to several movements for regional autonomy and independence, highlighting the consciousness of an Azorean outlook separate from national priorities (Cordeiro, 2003). Those who argued for political autonomy complained of the islands being ignored by the ‘motherland’ and demanded an opportunity for the region to regenerate in ways aligned with its own identity traits. Particularly active in the 1920s and 1930s, the autonomous movement of the Azores gathered several Azorean intellectuals and politicians who stood both for the decentralisation of the Portuguese administration and for a sense of union between the islands (Cordeiro, 1999). They claimed that it was on the islands that the best Portuguese characteristics were preserved, due to the protective seal of insular isolation. As examples of the preservation of the nation’s ancestral qualities, they offered the way Azoreans acted

in key historical periods when the archipelago had been called upon to represent the highest national ideals, such as patriotism and the defense of political independence during the resistance to Spanish rule (1580-1583), or the endorsement of liberal principles (in the first decades of the nineteenth century).

This can explain why the appeal of tradition has been so strong over the centuries and is still felt, though to a lesser degree than in the past. This is coupled with the importance of an emotional attachment to one's birthplace, from which ensues an inclination to preserve rather than to reform, and the preference for popular values and beliefs, considered more authentic than urban or cosmopolitan ones. We can draw from this circumstance a framework for understanding the close relationship between the people, geography, and the cultural and artistic sphere. For a long time, being Azorean meant being devoted to what pertained to the Azores, to its traditions, its landscape, its regional and traditional traits: linguistic peculiarities, gastronomy, folklore, and so forth. Although the Azorean mindset swayed from the conformity of being in a small, enclosed space and often acted upon the desire to leave it and to explore the world, the islands, with their unique characteristics and the exclusive Azorean traditions, would always be nostalgically remembered and highly valued.

Those who emigrated did it to avoid extreme poverty, and those who moved to Lisbon or mainland Portugal also felt *exiled*. The latter were driven by a similar purpose of personal betterment hoping to pursue an education that was not accessible on the islands. The emigration started as early as the sixteenth century, with the departure of the first colonist to America (Brasil). The large-scale exodus to northeast America took place in the late nineteenth century and particularly during the 1960 and 1970s. As the Azorean historian Fátima Sequeira Dias stressed, emigration seemed the only way out for people who were “sacrificed” by an “uneven distribution of property, by rudimentary agricultural

techniques and equipment, by the excessive weight of taxes, by an unfair system of conscription, by the absence of public education, by the difficulty of moving from one settlement to the other, by the costly expenses of traveling abroad” (Dias, 2008, p. 61<sup>3</sup>). Despite this, the population felt a deep emotional bond with the land. Emigration, a major theme in Azorean literature and art, intensified the sense of abandonment of a people that already faced the hardship of poverty and volcanic activity, putting further emphasis to the Portuguese word *saudade*. As Daniel de Sá wrote in one of his novels, “To leave the island is the best way to stay on the island” (Sá, 2010, p. 132<sup>4</sup>).

In art, the best known example of the emigration theme is *The Emigrants* (1926), by Domingos Rebelo, a painting that belongs to the collection of the Carlos Machado Museum, in Ponta Delgada. It portrays a farewell scene in the port of Ponta Delgada. The characters that are leaving are poor, as is obvious from their clothes. They await by the sea, with sunken heads and gloomy countenances, for the departure of the ship that will take them overseas. They take with them symbols of Azorean culture: the two-hearts guitar<sup>5</sup>, a basket with oranges (an item that brought wealth to landowners in the nineteenth century, as it was intensely grown and exported to England), a religious painting, and a traditional religious festivity coat. The ‘authentic’ Azorean identity is reflected in the popular objects that compose a rural culture in which agriculture combines with music and religion.

Throughout the twentieth century, emigration continued to inspire many artists. The poetry of Vitorino Nemésio, a poet who moved to mainland Portugal to complete his education and who ultimately resided and made a career there as a university professor, is full of

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3 Authors’ translation.

4 Authors’ translation.

5 A traditional stringed instrument from the Azores archipelago, the two-hearts guitar (known in Portuguese as *Viola da Terra*) is a type of viola with unique features that distinguish it from conventional violas and guitars.

marine references, as if the poet were himself a creature born in the sea. He confessed that his Azoreanity (a word he coined in 1932) was intensified by the experience of exile (Nemésio, 1932).

The best-known Azorean-born female intellectual is Natália Correia, a poet, playwright, essayist, and politician who also moved to Lisbon at an early age. She wrote in one of her poems:

*I'm not from here. I was nursed by oceanic breasts.  
My mother was a nymph, my father a lava storm.  
A half-breed of wave and volcanic sulfur,  
I am my own wet and wild dove.*<sup>6</sup>

These four lines summarise Azorean identity: the migrant's condition ("I'm not from here") combines with the sense of belonging to an insular reality ("I was nursed by Atlantic breasts"). The uniqueness of Atlantic climate, prone to sudden changes from mild and sunny to damp, foggy, and stormy, contributes to shaping the ("wet and wild") character of the poet in close similarity to that of the landscape, both of them driven by the uncontrollable forces of the ocean and the volcanoes ("A half-breed of wave and volcanic sulfur"). Finally, the reference to the dove highlights one of the major symbols of religious fervour in the archipelago, also pointing to the contrasting character of a population that is both tame and brave. Finally, "I am my own wet and wild dove" highlights a sense of self-sufficiency, in which a definition of womanhood that strikes a feminist chord resonates.

In recent decades, Azorean culture has evolved from the island to the world, from the popular characters to individual, different, deviant, complex identities that impel a revision of what it means to be Azorean. The most recent literature is no longer rich with rural characters that hold unshakeable religious faith and define themselves within the framework of the Azorean landscape. It is aware of being part of and

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6 Authors' translation. The lines are from a poem published in Correia (1961).



participating in a world in permanent change. Poets, writers, and artists reflect contemporary aesthetics and concerns. The questions that they ask when addressing the theme of identity is no longer ‘Who am I? Who are we?’, but ‘How am I/we changing? How do I make sense of a mutable world? What can I do to become what I wish to be? How is it possible to know myself? How do I reconcile history and tradition with progress?’ They also show a constant mark of contemporary art and culture—the critical stance, the metadiscourse (with the work of art reflecting on its nature as a work of art), the courage of transgressing old formulas and experimenting with new artistic possibilities.

As an example of the new aesthetic grammar, Urbano Bettencourt (2019 [2005], pp. 134-135), an Azorean poet born on Pico Island, rewrites the Apostles’ Creed to reveal persistent Azorean traits, presented now in a completely new light:

*I believe*

*In the coming of the Great Earthquake straight from the heart  
of the two-hearts guitar of land and sea*

*[...]*

*I believe*

*in a cost-effective Volcano by the end of the century  
that crowns me with metamorphic languages  
and I believe*

*that the metaphoric currents of basalt  
and mists will sink in the whispering waters.*

*I believe*

*that the island ahead will move to the back  
without blurring the landscape’s greens  
and I believe*

*that this will not upset Raul Brandão  
nor affect the tourism revenues*

*[...]*

*And I hope that Michael, the Angel on duty, will serve us  
Animal Farm in paperback, pocket-size, funded edition.<sup>7</sup>  
[...]*

The poem highlights the elements of Azorean identity, specifically music (the two-hearts guitar), religion (the Catholic faith patent in the formal structure of the Apostles' Creed), and nature: earthquakes, volcanoes, basalt, mists, water, the island in front, and even the many shades of green that can be seen on the islands are all present in the lines above. But nature doesn't maintain previous messages. The Great Earthquake promises to start a new cycle of creativity, not destruction, just as the Volcano, which in the likeness of the spiritual flames that conveyed wisdom to those who received the Holy Spirit, also promises to provide new poetic resources (the "metamorphic languages"). In a similar manner, the basalt currents, which originated from lava eruptions, don't smother the words; on the contrary, they sink in "whispering waters," thus consolidating the idea that no destruction impedes creation. But, most importantly, the rewriting of Azoreanity goes beyond the region and creates an intertextual dialogue with two books and authors from external territories, one Portuguese, the other English, namely: Raul Brandão, author of *The Unknown Islands*<sup>8</sup>, and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Thus, the poet includes in his prayer the national and world literary traditions, without losing awareness of the particular Azorean character from which he stands.

The achievement of full political autonomy in 1976, with the creation of a regional government, was crucial for the start of a new cycle in Azorean society and culture. It brought optimism, interrupted for some time the emigratory flow, and transformed the human element of the region. Higher education became accessible with the creation of the University

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7 Authors' translation. The poem is published within Bettencourt (2019 [2005]).

8 One of the most celebrated works of Portuguese travel literature, written after a trip to Azores and Madeira, in 1924. The book was originally published in 1924; two English translations were recently published, one in 2020 (Tagus Press) and the other in 2024 (Letras Lavadas).

of the Azores (UAc) in 1976. The political powers decided to disperse the university across three islands (São Miguel, Terceira, and Faial), to foster educational decentralisation. After gaining political autonomy, the region experienced major developments in other sectors too. The construction of better roads and the improvement of transportation services facilitated contact within each island and between islands. Even if these contacts are expensive, steps were taken to bring Azoreans closer together. The overall improvement enabled the tourism sector to grow and launched the population on a route of emancipation that is far from providing prosperity but is no longer binding the inhabitants to famine and ignorance.

Poverty, emigration, religiosity, volcanism, rurality, and insularity are still cultural cornerstones. It is from their tremendous presence that Azorean culture was born—literature, folklore, and the arts made them the sources of creativity, and for centuries artists and artisans drew inspiration for their work from religion and from nature—the ocean, the land, the vegetation and the fauna, the lakes, the rocks, the sights, the earthquakes, the hot springs and boiling water cauldrons, the caves and the beaches. It subjected the Azorean people to a mix of fascination, awe, and terror. But the cultural sector is being invited to revise the old patterns of taste and thinking by the transformative force of the outside world that crosses daily the threshold of what was once a small territory.

Religion still occupies a central position in society and culture. The Azores are renowned for their vibrant festival scene, steeped in local culture, history, and tradition, and most festivals are largely characterised by their religious origins, reflecting the deep-rooted Catholic faith alive across the islands. The Festival of the Lord Holy Christ of the Miracles (Festa do Senhor Santo Cristo dos Milagres) on São Miguel Island, for instance, is one of the most significant religious events. Taking place on the fifth Sunday after Easter, this week-long festival includes processions, decorated streets, and celebrations that

culminate in a grand parade of the image of Christ. Similarly, Holy Spirit Festivals (Festas do Espírito Santo) are held on all the islands from Easter to September, featuring processions, traditional folk music, and communal meals.

## Heritage and innovation: Exploring festivals and contemporary art

Contemporary cultural life in the Azores is defined by a dynamic network of festivals, creative institutions, and artistic initiatives. Far from being isolated or static, these expressions weave together ancient traditions and modern experimentation, creating a rich tapestry that reflects both the deep heritage of the islands and their adaptive evolution in a globalised world. Although religious manifestations and historical legacies continue to underpin Azorean identity, a new generation of festivals and creative projects is transforming the cultural landscape by engaging new audiences, innovative technologies, and critical social debates.

One of the most visible expressions of the Azorean cultural heritage is found in its musical traditions. The islands boast a high level of musical literacy, fostered by an extensive network of philharmonic bands<sup>9</sup>, regional conservatories, and informal music schools. Traditional musical forms such as the songs performed during Lenten Pilgrimages<sup>10</sup>, the festive refrains of the Holy Spirit celebrations, and the elaborate Carnival balls of Terceira (recognised by some as among the largest

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9 Philharmonic bands are orchestral ensembles—either professional or semi-professional—dedicated to performing a repertoire primarily of classical and symphonic music. These groups not only perform regular concerts but also serve as key cultural institutions that enhance the musical education and community engagement of their regions.

10 Lenten Pilgrimages are religious processions held in São Miguel during the lead-up to Easter, where communities participate in a solemn walk accompanied by traditional liturgical music. For more information, see: [https://aeazores.org/en/cp\\_diaspora/lenten-pilgrimages](https://aeazores.org/en/cp_diaspora/lenten-pilgrimages)

popular theatre festivals in Europe, as noted by Coutinho Cabral, 2015) offer a sonorous mirror to the community's collective identity. These musical expressions have long been tied to the rituals and religious observances that define the archipelago's historical narrative. They serve as living archives of communal memory.

A series of local festivals have been contributing to the involvement of local communities and the cultural development of the archipelago, creating and retaining audiences, and strengthening the sense of belonging and placemaking as well as openness to the world. A new generation of cultural initiatives has begun to reinterpret these traditions through innovative formats. The Tremor Festival ([tremor-pdl.com](http://tremor-pdl.com)), which has been held annually on São Miguel Island since 2014, epitomises this creative reconfiguration. Tremor is not simply a music festival; it is an immersive cultural experience that transforms the island's landscapes into a stage for artistic collaboration. Concerts are staged in unconventional venues, from lava caves and abandoned warehouses to rustic village squares, which not only challenge traditional ideas of performance space but also invite international artists to collaborate with local communities. According to the festival's organisers, its aim is “to intersect art, territory, and local communities” by offering artistic residencies and exploring the interplay between music and the environment. Tremor, therefore, is a laboratory where heritage meets experimentation, and where age-old melodies are reimaged through contemporary voices.

Building upon the innovative spirit of Tremor, the Walk&Talk Festival ([andafala.org/Walktalkazores](http://andafala.org/Walktalkazores)) (see Figure 5.3), initiated by the Anda & Fala



**FIGURE 5.3.**  
Walk&Talk Biennial  
2025, DESCOLA (Parque  
Atlântico, São Miguel).  
Photo: Mariana Lopes

association in 2011, has steadily become a cornerstone of contemporary art in the Azores. Unlike conventional festivals that focus solely on performance, Walk&Talk redefines public space by inviting more than 500 artists and creatives to transform everyday urban environments into dynamic canvases for artistic expression. Through site-specific installations, interactive workshops, and public debates, the festival blurs the boundaries between creator and audience.

By reclaiming streets, parks, and even abandoned buildings as spaces for cultural dialogue, Walk&Talk actively fosters a collective sense of ownership over the cultural narrative that is continuously reinterpreted by the community. This event not only underlines the importance of spatial reappropriation but also highlights a commitment to reengaging with the urban environment in innovative, sustainable ways. Through site-specific installations, interactive workshops, and public debates, the festival blurs the boundaries between creator and audience. In 2019, this commitment to continuity and engagement led to the establishment of VAGA ([andafala.org/Vagapdl](http://andafala.org/Vagapdl)), a permanent cultural hub in Ponta Delgada that further extends the festival's impact throughout the year by hosting residencies, workshops, talks, and educational programs. VAGA reinforces local connectivity and deepens the collaborative spirit that Walk&Talk fosters, allowing the community to reclaim its urban spaces as living galleries of innovation.

Complementing these large-scale festivals is Estúdio 13 ([estudio13.net](http://estudio13.net)), an intimate creative hub on São Miguel that plays a critical role in sustaining everyday artistic practice. Estúdio 13 functions as a rehearsal space, recording studio, and live performance venue, providing emerging artists with a nurturing environment for experimentation and collaboration. Here, creative work is not confined to a once-a-year event; instead, the studio supports ongoing projects that delve into interdisciplinary expressions ranging from music and performance to multimedia installations. The continuous nature of Estúdio 13's work

ensures that creative innovation is embedded in the daily cultural fabric of the islands.

Music in the Azores is further enriched by a number of innovative ensembles that challenge the traditional boundaries of classical performance. Projects like *Quadrivium* and *Sinfoneta de Ponta Delgada* ([instagram.com/quadryviumaa](https://www.instagram.com/quadryviumaa)) have emerged as key players in diversifying the local musical landscape. Through chamber concerts, educational outreach, and collaborations with international artists, these ensembles not only revive classical repertoires but reinterpret them for modern audiences, demonstrating that classical music remains a living, evolving art form that both honors and transforms the cultural identity of this peripheral region.

Literary and audiovisual productions have also been integral to this cultural evolution. The Archipelago of Writers festival ([arquipelagoescritores.pt](http://arquipelagoescritores.pt)), since its debut in 2018, has quickly become a prominent literary event that brings together local, continental, and international voices. By creating a platform for dialogue and innovative storytelling, the festival challenges established narratives and encourages new interpretations of what it means to be Azorean. Its multidisciplinary approach featuring public readings, panel discussions, and interactive workshops allows participants to explore complex themes such as identity, diaspora, and the tensions between tradition and modernity.

Audiovisual production, in particular, is opening up new opportunities that have the potential to reshape the image of the Azores and project it to a wider international audience. A compelling illustration of this is the Netflix series *Rabo de Peixe* (*Turn of the Tide*), filmed on São Miguel. Far from presenting a nostalgic or overly romanticised view of island life, the series portrays the stark realities and resilient spirit of a traditional fishing community. By using local landscapes not merely as backdrops but as integral elements of its narrative, *Rabo de Peixe* brings to light

issues of marginality and economic hardship while simultaneously celebrating the transformative power of community. Its international success has also spurred economic opportunities, technical training, and heightened cultural visibility for local professionals, thereby contributing significantly to the evolution of the region's audiovisual sector.

Moreover, the Azorean creative scene is characterised by a range of grassroots, community-driven initiatives that merge art with social and environmental concerns. One innovative project that exemplifies this trend is Cães do Mar ([caesdomar.pt](http://caesdomar.pt)), an artist-led initiative from the western islands that seamlessly integrates creative practice with environmental activism. Cães do Mar organises workshops, site-specific installations, and walking labs that invite local communities to engage with their natural surroundings and reflect on issues of sustainability and local identity. This process-oriented approach, which values collaboration and continuous dialogue, is key in addressing both the slow rhythms of island life and the challenges imposed by global pressures.

Among the many cultural initiatives across the Azores, three stand out for showing how creativity is rooted in different islands. The Azores Fringe Festival ([mirateca.com/fringe](http://mirateca.com/fringe)), based on Pico Island, has become a lively platform for independent and experimental art, bringing together artists from diverse backgrounds and holding events on several islands. In Santa Maria, the Santa Maria Blues Festival ([instagram.com/fsantamariablues](https://www.instagram.com/fsantamariablues)) is a key cultural event, known for its open-air concerts and strong community spirit, blending international blues music with the island's unique atmosphere.

While these creative endeavors celebrate the rich cultural heritage of the Azores, they also implicitly highlight contemporary challenges. Global tourism, for instance, brings increased visibility and economic benefits but also places pressure on local resources and demands a delicate balance between preservation and development. Additionally, concerns regarding the uneven distribution of cultural funding have



surfaced; while major initiatives in São Miguel and Terceira receive substantial investments, smaller islands often struggle to secure similar resources. In various focus groups and cultural mapping exercises, local cultural producers have called for innovative policy frameworks and more equitable funding strategies to support the region's diverse creative ecosystem.

In this context, the multifaceted initiatives described above demonstrate that the Azorean cultural landscape is in a state of dynamic transformation. These interconnected expressions not only reaffirm a deep connection to the islands' storied past but also pave the way for a creative future that is both resilient and responsive to contemporary demands.

Ultimately, the reimagining of cultural expression in the Azores is a narrative of transformation and continuity. Traditional elements rooted in religious celebrations, folk music, and communal rituals continue to serve as the foundation of Azorean identity. This deep bond is expressed through the arts where painting, music, and literature engage in a continual dialogue with the landscape, capturing the islands' strength as both a physical and symbolic space. The natural splendor and cultural heritage of the Azores clearly stand out as major strengths. The archipelago's volcanic landscapes, storied maritime history, and resilient traditions provide a potent source of creative inspiration. Artists and cultural practitioners draw on centuries of communal memory to produce works that not only honor traditional practices but also breathe fresh, innovative life into them. This inherent richness has cultivated a collaborative spirit among local artists, enabling them to form networks that enrich their creative output. Such a landscape is not only a wellspring of artistic authenticity but also a robust engine for sustainable and socio-economic development, especially when it nurtures community pride and engagement.

## Cultural and creative industries in the Azores: Opportunities and challenges

### Context

The cultural and creative sector has been asserting itself between traditions and modernity, the sense of place, history, and a vision of what it means to be Azorean in the global world, demonstrating dynamism, innovation, and the ability to adapt to the new challenges of the present. As the islands continue to redefine their cultural identity in tandem with economic and social changes, cultural and creative industries (CCIs) have emerged not only as custodians of heritage but also as key drivers of local development. This transformation is powered by a growing constellation of festivals, creative hubs, and grassroots initiatives that resonate with the deep-seated sense of place inherent in Azorean identity. Throughout the archipelago, cultural organisations and individual cultural agents sustain a vibrant creative ecosystem despite longstanding challenges. It can be understood as a cultural ecosystem: an interdependent and adaptive network of organisations, infrastructures, and practitioners shaped by the islands' specific geography and histories.

### Cultural infrastructure

The Azores islands are home to 907 cultural organisations, associations, businesses, and individual cultural agents (see Tables 5.1 and 5.2). These data were provided by the Regional Directorate of Culture (DRAC) at the request of the Azores Lab team during the cultural mapping of the Azores carried out within the IN SITU project. More recently, this dataset was further revised and updated by the team, ensuring that the inventory reflects the most current and legitimate picture of the sector. To provide a more comprehensive picture of the Azorean context, Table

5.1 also presents data on resident population (Census 2021, obtained through SREA, 2022) alongside the distribution of CCIs. This combined perspective highlights how the demographic reality of the nine islands, marked by significant differences in both territory and population size, influences cultural and creative activity across the archipelago.

**Table 5.1.** Distribution of cultural and creative industries organizations across the Azores islands (data originally from 2023, updated in 2025)

| Island       | Population<br>(2021) | %<br>Population | Number of<br>CCIs | % CCIs     |
|--------------|----------------------|-----------------|-------------------|------------|
| Santa Maria  | 5,406                | 2.3             | 24                | 2.6        |
| São Miguel   | 133,288              | 56.4            | 395               | 43.6       |
| Terceira     | 53,234               | 22.5            | 161               | 17.8       |
| Graciosa     | 4,090                | 1.7             | 24                | 2.6        |
| São Jorge    | 8,373                | 3.5             | 21                | 2.3        |
| Pico         | 13,879               | 5.9             | 93                | 10.2       |
| Faial        | 14,331               | 6.1             | 152               | 16.8       |
| Flores       | 3,428                | 1.5             | 30                | 3.3        |
| Corvo        | 384                  | 0.2             | 7                 | 0.8        |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>236,413</b>       | <b>100</b>      | <b>907</b>        | <b>100</b> |

Sources: CCI data: Regional Directorate of Culture (DRAC), revised and updated by the Azores Lab team (IN SITU project). Population data: Census 2021 (INE), obtained through the Regional Statistical Office of the Azores (SREA, 2022).

Reading Tables 5.1 and 5.2, CCI activity clusters on São Miguel and Terceira, reflecting population size, infrastructure, and historically higher shares of public funding. Smaller islands (e.g., Faial, Flores, Graciosa, Santa Maria, Corvo) show narrower profiles and—at times—higher per-capita “creative density,” but operate with thinner institutions and higher mobility/logistics costs. The result is a partially integrated archipelago: festivals and regional associations stitch islands together episodically, yet structural inequalities in demography, transport, and finance limit routine circulation of people, works, and skills. Consequently, safeguarding of intangible heritage falls disproportionately on smaller communities, while diversification and visibility concentrate in the hubs. For policy, the task is less to increase volume everywhere than to strengthen the connective tissue—mobility subsidies, shared production facilities, and training—so that islands’ complementarities function as a network.

São Miguel (and, to a lesser extent, Terceira) concentrate population, venues, and funding, so they show the broadest cultural profiles. Smaller islands sustain narrower profiles rooted in community traditions, with higher churn and fewer institutional supports.

The comparison points simultaneously to concentration and fragility: São Miguel’s diversification generates visibility and opportunities not replicated elsewhere, while the smaller islands bear the responsibility of safeguarding intangible heritage under more precarious conditions. Occasional collaborations across islands through festivals, regional associations, and artistic mobility provide some connective tissue, yet the ecosystem remains only partially integrated, with persistent structural inequalities in population, funding, infrastructures, and logistics limiting stronger inter-island connectivity.

**Table 5.2.** Distribution of cultural and creative industries across the Azores by island and sector of activity (data originally from 2023, updated in 2025)

| Island      | Traditional | Visual arts | Music | Associations | Theater | Cinema & Video | Cultural equipment | Performance | Writers | Bookshops | Total CCIs |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------|--------------|---------|----------------|--------------------|-------------|---------|-----------|------------|
| Santa Maria | 8           | 4           | 3     | 4            | 1       | 1              | 1                  | 1           | 1       | 0         | 24         |
| São Miguel  | 86          | 91          | 58    | 40           | 14      | 28             | 29                 | 19          | 17      | 13        | 395        |
| Terceira    | 50          | 21          | 35    | 9            | 14      | 6              | 8                  | 5           | 8       | 5         | 161        |
| Graciosa    | 13          | 4           | 1     | 3            | 2       | 0              | 1                  | 0           | 0       | 0         | 24         |
| São Jorge   | 2           | 7           | 2     | 3            | 3       | 1              | 1                  | 1           | 0       | 1         | 21         |
| Pico        | 40          | 23          | 4     | 7            | 5       | 2              | 1                  | 8           | 2       | 1         | 93         |
| Faial       | 36          | 36          | 33    | 4            | 10      | 10             | 4                  | 10          | 7       | 2         | 152        |
| Flores      | 8           | 11          | 7     | 0            | 2       | 0              | 2                  | 0           | 0       | 0         | 30         |
| Corvo       | 4           | 2           | 0     | 0            | 0       | 0              | 1                  | 0           | 0       | 0         | 7          |
| Total       | 247         | 199         | 143   | 70           | 51      | 48             | 48                 | 44          | 35      | 22        | 907        |

Source: Regional Directorate of Culture (DRAC), data revised and updated by the Azores Lab team (IN SITU project)

## Mapping findings

Alongside this quantitative inventory, the mapping process also included participatory workshops and focus groups with the participation of stakeholders. These sessions brought together cultural agents, artists, representatives of government bodies, and municipal officers, creating spaces for dialogue across sectors and territories. The discussions not only confirmed the diversity of activity captured in the data but also revealed common challenges such as dependence on uneven funding, the strain of limited infrastructures, and the emotional toll of sustaining cultural work in insular contexts. These reflections illustrate how the mapping process combined statistical data with lived experiences, giving greater depth to the picture of the cultural sector in the Azores.

A recurring concern is the heavy reliance on public funding—which often forces creative actors to tap into mainland networks to secure necessary resources. Several focus group participants noted that, despite the Regional Directorate of Culture managing public cultural spaces such as museums and libraries, support policies remain outdated and underfunded. As one cultural agent remarked, “Our funding model is reactive and uneven; the creative output is tremendous, yet our budgets lag far behind what is needed.” A SWOT analysis further distilled these challenges by outlining strengths like the rich natural and cultural heritage and opportunities such as diversified tourism, alongside threats including funding delays and persistent insularity, particularly affecting smaller islands (see Table 5.3).

The comprehensive cultural mapping inventories and subsequent focus group discussions allowed us to explore not only the sheer volume of cultural activity in the Azores but also to understand the deeper dynamics shaping the Cultural and Creative Industries in the region. Through the lens of an analysis that captured the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of this vibrant sector, a picture emerges that is rich in both promise and complexity.

**Table 5.3.** SWOT analysis of the cultural ecosystem, Azores (Portugal), 2023

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>STRENGTHS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Natural environment and cultural heritage</li><li>• Collaboration between CCI Actors</li><li>• Unique approach to artistic creation in the Azores</li></ul>                                         | <p><b>WEAKNESSES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Dependence on public funding and lack of financial support</li><li>• Lack of training for cultural programming</li><li>• Centralisation of CCI activities</li></ul> |
| <p><b>OPPORTUNITIES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Expanding tourism</li><li>• Music festivals and performing arts</li><li>• Financial support from national government</li><li>• Cooperation with new promoters and emerging structures</li></ul> | <p><b>THREATS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Public funding can be late and untimely</li><li>• Insularity of the creative sector</li><li>• Need to constantly adapt to changing context</li></ul>                   |

Source: Rainey & Collins (2023). Data submitted by the Azores Lab team.

### Challenges and tensions

This creative power is counterbalanced by significant challenges. One notable weakness is the heavy reliance on public funding and the inconsistent financial support available to CCIs, particularly in the smaller islands. Many focus group participants voiced their concerns that funding mechanisms are not only outdated but also unevenly distributed, leaving islands outside the major hubs of São Miguel and Terceira struggling to keep pace.

Beyond structural barriers, focus group participants repeatedly emphasised the exhaustion felt by many cultural agents. This exhaustion reflects chronic underfunding, bureaucratic demands, and the emotional labour of sustaining cultural life in small, insular communities. Agents described how the constant need to 'do more with less' places significant strain on their personal and professional well-being, sometimes leading to disengagement. Yet this theme of fatigue also underscores the resilience of those who continue to create, organise, and advocate despite such constraints, making exhaustion itself an important marker of the fragility and persistence of the Azorean cultural ecosystem. Furthermore, the limited availability of specialised training in cultural programming has stifled professional development, leaving some local talents underprepared to leverage their creative potential fully.

In parallel, the SWOT analysis highlighted promising opportunities that could transform these challenges into catalysts for growth. For instance, diversifying tourism emerged as a particularly potent lever, one that can elevate local cultural offerings and provide a sustainable revenue stream. Innovative festivals and creative hubs are already beginning to integrate traditional cultural expressions with modern, experiential formats. These initiatives open doors not only to new audiences but also to international collaborations, thereby positioning the Azores as a dynamic creative hub beyond its insular image.

Yet the analysis also uncovered significant threats. The unpredictability of public funding, with its often-late disbursements, remains a persistent challenge. The region's insularity, while a source of unique creative energy, also poses a risk of isolation from broader cultural networks and emerging market opportunities. Additionally, the need for the CCIs to constantly adapt to rapid changes in both digital technologies and global economic conditions has become increasingly pressing.



Taken together, this narrative of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats forms a multifaceted understanding of the Azorean CCIs. It tells the story of an ecosystem that is deeply rooted in local heritage and communal creativity, yet one that is striving to overcome structural barriers and embrace a future of increased resilience and dynamic collaboration.

The role of the Regional Directorate of Culture, a department of the Azores government, has been important in this context. While it manages a wide range of public cultural spaces, such as museums, public libraries, and archives, it also has several support policies to stimulate the creation, production, dissemination, and internationalisation of cultural and creative projects. Nonetheless, according to the agents in the cultural and creative sector, these measures seem to be inadequate, outdated, and financially limited.

The development and growth of the cultural and creative sector are important for the region, but the relationship between the cultural sector and regional government is strained due to funding issues. Many creative actors use networks on the Portuguese mainland to apply for funding directly from the national government. Instead of restraining the cultural and creative sector, the funding constraints have made it increasingly politically active and CCI actors are now advocating for legislative and policy changes regarding their sector.

In the meantime, global tourism, while driving increased international interest and economic benefits, simultaneously exerts pressure on local infrastructures. The surge of visitors during peak cultural events can strain resources and, if not carefully managed, may erode the authenticity of local traditions. Furthermore, despite the influx of innovative projects, the regional funding framework remains a point of contention. In several focus groups, cultural practitioners noted that while larger islands like São Miguel and Terceira benefit from robust investments, smaller islands continue to struggle with insufficient support. As one participant poignantly observed, “Our islands are bursting with creative

energy, yet the funding system leaves us isolated and chronically under-resourced.” During focus groups held by the IN SITU Azores team on April 27 and May 5, 2023, most cultural and creative agents expressed that although the regional government is generally open to their input, the existing public policies are either ineffective or entirely lacking. They argued that while Azorean culture is evolving, the policies in place do not keep pace with these changes, failing to address emerging needs and adapt to new projects.

The reimagining of Azorean cultural expression is, at its core, a narrative of transformation and continuity. It is the story of a people who, despite the challenges of isolation, poverty, and shifting global dynamics, have managed to craft a distinct identity that is both resilient and forward-looking. As the islands continue to produce art, music, literature, and innovative cultural projects, they also pave the way for a new era of sustainable development, one that is rooted in local heritage yet unafraid to engage with international influences.

Looking forward and considering the cultural ecosystem in the Azores in 10 to 15 years, cultural participants in the focus groups envisioned a sector that is more dynamic, diversified, robust, and better aligned with national and international contexts. They argued for a sustainable cultural ecosystem that would be built on a creative and cultural strategy that included both private and publicly funded projects. Hoping for more collaborative communication between those who devise and manage the policies for financial resources and those who act directly in creating and producing cultural and artistic events, participants stressed the need for government officials to consult CCI actors while creating cultural policies and strategies.

Cultural and creative agents asserted that more investment was needed in the sector, including for training professionals in cultural programming (see Figure 5.4). They mentioned the cost of insularity could be eased by the regional government through a consolidated

financial support system. Enhancing public engagement with cultural matters and instigating a greater appreciation of creative and critical thinking were also referred to as important cornerstones for the reinvention of Azorean cultural and artistic traditions.

This includes not only consolidating financial support mechanisms but also establishing clear lines of communication between local cultural actors and governmental bodies. Capacity-building initiatives must be prioritised: training programs in cultural programming, digital skills, and artistic entrepreneurship are essential to empower local talent and ensure that creative projects can flourish independently. Parallel to this, policies should be recalibrated to reflect the dynamic, interconnected nature of the cultural landscape in the Azores. This means moving away from one-size-fits-all models and embracing a context-specific approach that addresses the unique challenges of insularity, infrastructural disparities, and the pressures of tourism.

In short, the Azorean cultural and creative sector is at a crossroads. It is a realm where tradition intersects with modernity, where the deep-seated echoes of religious rites and migratory journeys blend with innovative artistic endeavours that harness cutting-edge technology and collaborative networks. This continuous interplay creates a unique resilience—a creative pulse that underpins both the social and economic fabrics of the islands.

As the region navigates the challenges of global integration, environmental pressures, and resource inequity, its future depends on embracing a holistic

**FIGURE 5.4.**  
IN SITU training session with cultural practitioners, held in Ponta Delgada, São Miguel (Azores). Photo: Beatriz Sousa, 2024



strategy that champions creative autonomy, sustainable practices, and inclusive growth. By fostering stronger partnerships between public institutions, cultural practitioners, and local communities, the Azores can lay the groundwork for a robust, responsive cultural ecosystem that is equipped to tackle the demands of the twenty-first century.

## Conclusion

The Azores archipelago is a space where tradition and modernity intertwine, with the cultural and creative sector acting as a guardian of the past and a driving force for future innovation. Azorean identity is marked by insularity, generating a strong emotional connection to the place, expressed in *saudade* and migratory experiences. Artistic traditions, such as festivals and musical legacies, preserve cultural heritage while inspiring new interpretations.

Recently, a new generation of cultural initiatives, such as festivals and community-engaged projects, has transformed the artistic landscape, adapting to global trends and utilising modern technologies. However, the unequal distribution of resources and the lack of adequate policies challenge balanced development among the islands.

Focus groups held with cultural and creative practitioners in the Azores highlighted the urgent need for a more cohesive financial support system and stronger collaborative networks. Insularity, while inspiring, also limits the flow of resources and ideas. Nevertheless, there is a growing movement to overcome these challenges through international collaboration and digital platforms.

The Azorean cultural ecosystem is a narrative of transformation and continuity, reflecting an “island soul” that blends nostalgia and innovation. The vision for the future is of a more dynamic and resilient

sector, aligned with national guidelines and international trends, through policies that address disparities among the islands.

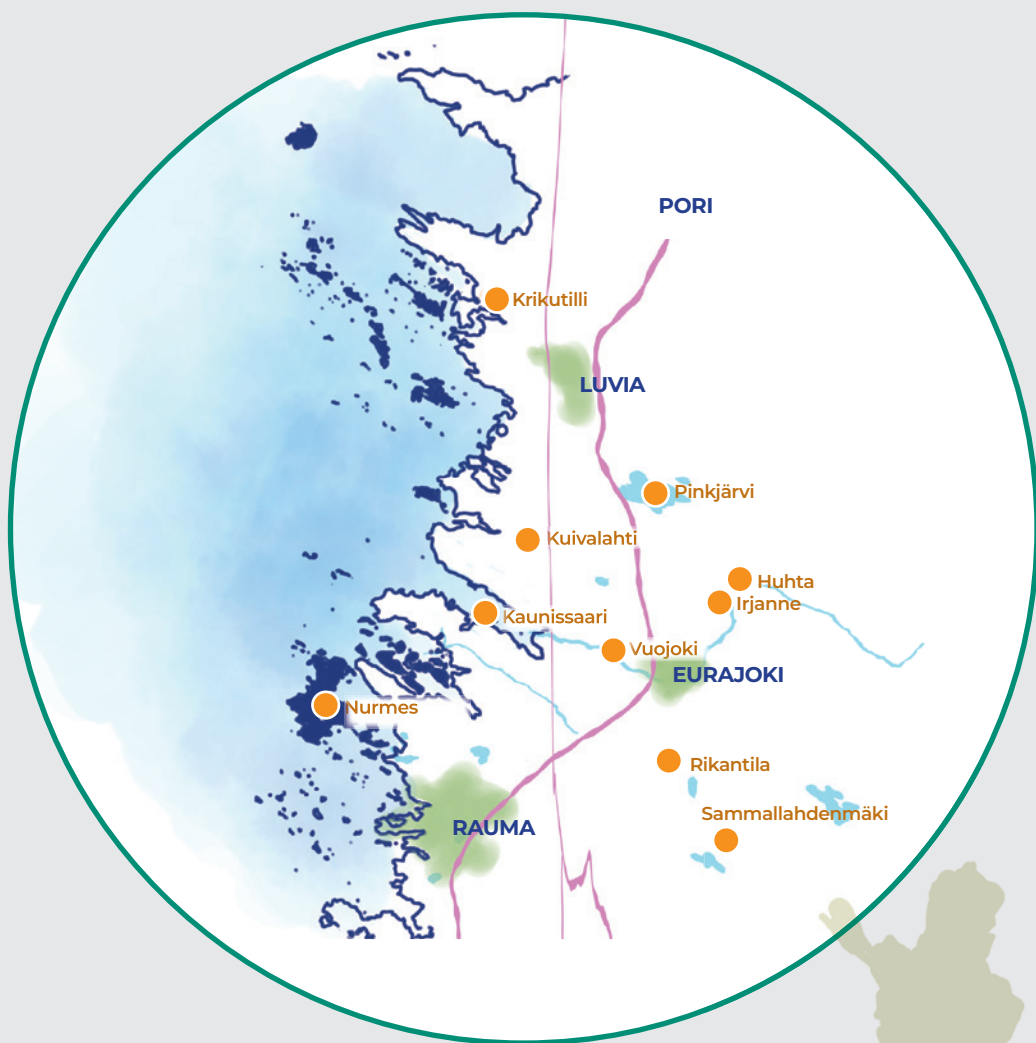
In conclusion, the reinterpretation of cultural expression in the Azores demonstrates the human capacity for creativity in the face of adversity. The islands, with their rich heritage and resilient communities, continue to produce art that reflects both their past and promising future. With stronger partnerships and innovative policies, the Azores are ready to redefine their identity in a new era of sustainable and inclusive development.

The journey ahead is complex, yet the very essence of the Azorean spirit—its capacity to blend nostalgia with a forward-looking vision—ensures that the islands will continue to be a crucible of cultural innovation. At the same time, the Azorean experience provides a relevant vantage point for broader debates on cultural governance in island and remote contexts. As in other peripheral regions, the cultural ecosystem of the Azores demonstrates how resilience is cultivated under conditions of structural constraint, including geographical isolation, uneven resource distribution, and dependence on limited public funding. The strategies developed by cultural agents in this context, ranging from community-based collaboration to the inventive use of scarce infrastructures, highlight both the vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities that define non-urban cultural ecosystems. Recognising these dynamics can inform comparative approaches to cultural policy, suggesting that insights from the Azores are not only locally significant but also contribute to rethinking governance frameworks in territories where fragility and innovation coexist.

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**FIGURE 6.1.**

Map of Rauma, Eurajoki, and the Baltic archipelago IN SITU Lab, Finland, with main centres, connections, and meaningful places. Map developed by Mollu Heino in collaboration with the rest of the Finland Lab team.



# 6

## **Rauma and Eurajoki:** Ripples on an even surface

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## Profile of a region

The Finnish Lab area is made of two municipalities, Rauma and Eurajoki, located in the Satakunta region in West Finland (Figure 6.1). Its landscape is outwardly homogenous, flat, forested, and dotted by fields and villages. It is situated on the border of the sea, and the area is featured by interior water bodies—the river Eurajoki, lakes, and you might also find small ponds from mires near the waterways. There is more than meets the eye, though: interaction and tensions exist between natural and manmade, between coast and inland, and between cities and countryside. The outward image of the city of Rauma and the municipality of Eurajoki is that of a relatively prosperous and industrialised West Coast. Following Statistics Finland's definitions, the Lab area falls either into the category of 'rural areas close to urban areas' or that of 'local centres in rural areas'.

One of the inner rifts characterising Eurajoki and Rauma are communities inherited from their former constituent municipalities. The latest consolidation of municipalities has taken place when Luvia recently merged with its neighbouring municipality Eurajoki, and both parts still retain distinct identities. Before this, Rauma had similarly engulfed the municipality of Lappi. In the bigger picture a north-south divide may be detected in the orientation towards urban centres: while Luvia turns to the neighbouring regional centre of Pori in the north, Eurajoki and the rural parts of Rauma are more closely connected with the city of Rauma. Rauma and Pori are traditional rivals, which still shows both in the ruthless local ice hockey team contests and in the tensions of regional policymaking. Outside the region, the city of Turku in the south is the closest main urban centre for the Lab area with the nearest international airport and passenger port.

The vicinity of the Baltic Sea divides the landscape into coastal and inland zones. The landscape may also be distinguished seasonally into a smiling face of summertime for tourists and boat and holiday home owners and a stern and stormy one in the wintertime for whomever dares the frozen sea and archipelago. The Baltic Sea provides access to the four corners of the world, while the inland watercourses have connected the area to the inner parts of Finland. Local people are tightly connected to the area through its nature, land and waters. As mentioned in the Speak Outs, for instance, ice swimming from a sauna by the sea is understood by many as an important part of life. Or, when the first sunny spring days dawn, the centre of the town of Rauma becomes empty, and people are at sea with their boats. Along the seashores, lakes, and ponds there are places where people retreat to their own privacy every now and then. An outsider may have some trouble understanding the value of all of these places. At the same time, they are so valuable for many locals that they would rather not advertise them too widely. The local communities are tightly knit and feel strongly connected with the places they inhabit.

***‘There’s no world without the sea. And by the sea a city, and in the city a port.’<sup>11</sup>***

## Cosmopolitan and parochial city of Rauma

West Finland has had long and continuous settlement since prehistoric times, being the first area to receive Western cultural influences such as the Catholic and then Lutheran faith, legal and administrative systems, as well as technological innovations and craft and food traditions. The West Coast has always been exposed to Swedish culture and language,

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11 Translated part of a poem from the Rauma-born author, T. Koivukari (2014). In Finnish: “Ei tätä maailmaa ilman merta, ja meren rannalla kaupunki, ja kaupungissa satama.”

which has left traces in local dialects, although nowadays the Lab area is practically totally Finnish-speaking. Some of the oldest Finnish cities were also founded there under Swedish rule, including Rauma.

At present, Rauma is considered a smallish city that is faring moderately well, especially in terms of industry. However, its population is both aging and slowly decreasing, as is that of all Finland. Rauma's main industries tend to go up and down with business cycles, and in harder times (such as the present) this is reflected in growing unemployment. However, one major order from the Rauma shipyard shows directly in the local employment rate. Even the rural parts of Rauma are affected by this fluctuation as much of their working age population works in manufacturing. Immigration has thus far only had a minor impact on the area's population, mostly due to the shipyard and the Olkiluoto nuclear power plant in Eurajoki. The municipality of Eurajoki faces the same demographic patterns as Rauma, but its overall situation remains relatively stable with a steady tax revenue from Olkiluoto.

The city of Rauma is one of Finland's six Mediaeval cities, having one of the oldest harbours in Finland. Rauma became a seafaring city, cosmopolitan and parochial at the same time. Its ships sailed as far as the Mediterranean. After returning and settling down, old sailors formed a major part of Rauma's population. This resulted not only in better living conditions but also in the formation of local dialects, manners, attitudes, and crafts. For instance, lace-making was brought to Rauma by sailors centuries ago, consequently evolving into its own style of Raumalace.

With Swedish domination giving way to Russian in 1809, Finland's West Coast became the western border of the Russian Empire until Finnish independence in 1917. Industrialization was pioneered in the late nineteenth century by the forest industry, which continues in the Rauma sawmill and paper and pulp factories. Another deep-rooted industry is shipbuilding, today represented by the Korean-owned Rauma Shipyard.

From a cosy wooden port town, Rauma has transformed into a mid-size Finnish city of about 40,000 inhabitants. The port still remains a major employer, mainly exporting paper, pulp, and timber. Higher education was started in the city by the Teacher Training School, still existing as a separate campus within the University of Turku. For a time, there was also a military presence in the coastal artillery base and garrison island of Kuuskajaskari, which was phased out in the 1990s (Haapala et al., 2017; Koskinen et al., 2014).

Rauma is nowadays a part of an industrial corridor extending along the West Coast, reaching Turku in the south and Pori in the north. Its port and shipping industry have extensive trade connections. Rauma also has vivid cultural collaborations with a number of cities in the Nordic Countries and around the Baltic.

## **Crofters, fishers, landed gentry, and energy producers: Rural Rauma and Eurajoki**

In the countryside, the manorial economy prospered since the Middle Ages. Vuojoki Manor in Eurajoki became one of the largest and most prosperous estates in the whole Satakunta region until its dissolution in the 1930s. Almost the whole parish of Eurajoki belonged in some way to the manor. All in all, the rural parts of Rauma and Eurajoki saw the end of the manorial economy and the splintering of the manorial estates mainly into small holdings during the twentieth century. After Finland's EU membership in 1995, these have gradually been consolidated into larger grain-producing farms. Fishing was always an important livelihood, peaking in the late nineteenth century, when Baltic herring from the Bothnian Sea—the part of the Baltic adjacent to the Lab area—was sold to the inland cities and as far as St. Petersburg. Nowadays professional fishing has all but died out in the area due to

increasing regulation, environmental problems, and lessening demand for domestic fish (Heino and Niinimäki, 1992).

The latest modern introduction to Eurajoki and Rauma has been the energy landscape. The Olkiluoto nuclear power plant in Eurajoki, starting in 1979, initiated large-scale modernization in Eurajoki that has otherwise remained a characteristically rural municipality of less than 10,000 inhabitants. Renewable energy production has also made its mark in the coastal landscape as shown by towering swarms of in- and offshore wind turbines. These are now being joined by new industrial-scale photovoltaic power plants in the inland parts of Rauma and Eurajoki (the one in Lakari, Rauma is, for now, the largest of its kind in the country).

While Rauma is, apart from being bigger, also clearly more international and extra-regionally connected than Eurajoki, the nuclear power plant makes the latter a recipient of skilled labour from abroad and an important hub in national and international energy security networks. On the other hand, the secluded power plant and its workforce form an enclave not too visible in the everyday landscape of Eurajoki—at least no more than the forest of wind turbines to the north of the area. Together they contribute to the municipal economy, helping to maintain local cultural institutions among other things.

## Heritage and nature: Top-down definitions and locally recognised practices

The heritage and nature of Rauma and Eurajoki are layered and multifaceted. Cultural heritage in the area includes tangible, intangible, natural, and digital heritage, both digitally born (e.g., videos and photos on nature in social media) and digitised content (e.g., old photos). There are both nationally and internationally established and mostly

locally known heritage sites, routes, and areas. These entail coastal and maritime heritage, much of it now protected as part of the Bothnian Sea National Park. In the non-urban inland areas the institutionally defined cultural heritage entails well-preserved historic villages, buildings of the Vuojoki Manor, Mediaeval roads such as the Bothnian Sea Coast Road, a ruined Mediaeval fortification, and numerous prehistoric sites, which all have some degree of official protection. In addition, there are several natural sites of value, legally protected as conservation areas. The cultural heritage of these places has evolved from people's relationship with them but it has become institutionalised by an intervention of a number of international, state, regional and local agencies, resulting in the official recognition, reframing and partial preservation of selected cultural or natural heritage objects. Despite the top-down character of the designations, there is also a high local awareness about these sites and their values.

Old Rauma has retained a partly Mediaeval town plan and is the largest consistent wooden town area in the Nordic countries with the oldest remaining buildings from the 1700s. It was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1991. The Sammallahdenmäki Bronze Age (1500–500 BC) burial site, added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1999, is a remarkable example of settlement over millennia in the current area of Rauma. It is an exceptionally large burial site which reaches beyond the boundaries of the nomination as a chain of smaller burial mounds following the ancient shoreline—now far inland—throughout the region.<sup>12</sup>

The character building of Vuojoki Manor was designed in 1836 by the architect Carl Ludvig Engel in a grandiose Empire Classicist style and is one of the most extensive preserved manorial building ensembles in Finland. For the last two decades, the manor has been a venue of several cultural activities with music, exhibitions, programs for children, food

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12 For more information on the prehistoric and built heritage of the area, see Uusi-Seppä (2012).

and drinks, and a yearly summer festival including the nomination of two local cultural actors as the 'Lord and Lady of the Manor' to act as goodwill ambassadors always for the coming year. These events have been appreciated and actively visited by local people. Until now, Vuojoki Manor has also hosted a yearly international video mapping festival, held in the darkest autumn. After the French Areva nuclear developer company pulled out in 2025, the manor has been leased to a Finnish service provider from 2026 on.

The foremost officially recognized natural site in the IN SITU Lab area is the Bothnian Sea National Park, established in 2011 and comprising almost the entire archipelago of the Satakunta Region. Like most Finnish national parks, it was founded on mainly unpopulated state-owned lands. Unlike them, its establishment was based on a strong local and regional initiative, striving to fill a gap in the national park network around the Bothnian Coast. The biggest islands lay close to Rauma and have forest cover. Towards the open sea the archipelago thins out and the islands grow smaller, some of them no more than bare cliffs or rugged moraine reefs. Here freshwater species meet those of the brackish Baltic waters. The lighthouses of Säppi and Kylmäpihlaja and the ex-garrison island of Kuuskajaskari are found in the National Park, the last two offering accommodation and catering services. There are also remnants of earlier fisherman settlements, some cabins now available for visitors. Both the underwater wildlife and heritage are rich, shipwrecks from different times littering the sea bottom along the often treacherous archipelago fairways. The state of the Bothnian Sea is still relatively good, although the eutrophication plaguing the entire Baltic Sea has reached there as well (Häyrynen et al., 2006). The archipelago area has attracted artistic activities such as *The Unsurveyed Area*, presented in Lens 1.

The "mini National Park" Pinkjärvi is the most important inland natural site. It is state-owned and protected as a recreation area containing forests,



## LENS 1

### *The Unsurveyed Area* cultural event in Nurmes, Rauma Archipelago and Bothnian Sea National Park

The largest island in the Rauma archipelago, the island of Nurmes, has been used as a venue for an art exhibition of The Unsurveyed Area project with 10 artists from all around the world who dealt with the water element from different artistic perspectives, revealing their personal attachment to nature through the narration of their artworks. The Unsurveyed Area cultural event has been organised since 2015 both in situ and on the web and has been supported by the city of Rauma, among others.

<https://www.luotaamatonalue.com/commitment-to-the-place-2021-2024.html>

**FIGURE 6.2.**

*The Unsurveyed Area*. Artist: Maija Esko, At Home.  
Photo: Maija Esko. 2019



lakes, and mires. These are being restored to a close to natural state. Although not a major tourist attraction, Pinkjärvi is held in esteem by local residents and frequented by visitors from nearby cities. The municipality of Eurajoki owns the former sawmill island of Kaunissaari, now returned to its natural state and protected as a recreation area. Apart from these, both Rauma and Eurajoki have a number of other smaller and mainly locally used nature conservation areas and nature trails with basic services.

As noted above, far from all cultural heritage or valued nature sites in the Lab area are officially recognised or institutionally protected. The well-preserved villages of Irjanne, Huhta, and Rikantila in Eurajoki, with tightly grouped, independent, and relatively big family farm houses often from the eighteenth or nineteenth century, were reported by the Lab's focus group participants (online, 18 April 2023) to be "creative areas." In the northeastern part of Eurajoki, the beautifully crafted Irjanne church from 1731 serves in summertime for weddings and as tourist attraction. As a place for a church, Irjanne has its roots from Medieval times. Local museums, jointly maintained by the Eurajoki Local Heritage Association, and the house of the local village association in several villages of Eurajoki are located next to the Irjanne church and keep the village lively year round. Close by, Huhta village still has its own active primary school that has attracted young families to move into the village. Interaction between Huhta and Irjanne is lively. The village Rikantila in the southeastern part of Eurajoki is known, since 2019, for a small coffee roastery and coffee shop, a producer of responsible coffee, with roots both in the United States and in an old farmhouse.

Even some of the intangible heritage of the Lab area, such as lace-making, has become officially recognised. The skill is practiced today both by professionals and laypeople, and is a theme of a yearly summer festival, Rauma Lace Week. Rauma lace-making is included in the National Inventory of Living Heritage in Finland, based on the UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Besides, present-day ship and boat builders and sailors in the area are involved in a community of clinker boat builders. Together with other communities, local clinker boat builders have compiled a description for the National Inventory of Living Heritage, consequently forming a part of the Nordic clinker boat traditions in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2021.

There are also plentiful examples of documented but not otherwise institutionally framed intangible heritage. For instance, according to local tradition, the Lutanjärvi lake in Rikantila is a giant's footprint connecting the lake to the old vernacular understanding of the bronze age burial sites in the area. These stories in Eurajoki are in turn linked to the Sammallahdenmäki World Heritage Site.

In sum, there are several “ripples” or dividing lines across the outwardly even Lab area. Some of them are ingrained in its nature—such as the maritime versus inland—while others are social, with deep historical or recent roots. Historical divisions are partly redundant vestiges of traditional agrarian society and its hierarchies, while more recent ones derive from the urbanisation process which created newer boundaries between urban-industrial and non-urban areas. Valued heritage and nature portray another kind of division, that between the lived human-nature and heritage relationships, manifested in the local concerns over the loss of heritage and the environmental degradation, and the official designations mostly handed down by agencies from outside the Lab area. What results from these criss-crossing dividing lines is a mosaic of local realities—a meshwork of boundaries often hardly detectable for an outsider but something most local residents and creatives are keenly aware of.

***‘Salty wind and stony streets / I wish I could get out of here one day’<sup>13</sup>***

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13 A part of the song lyrics from the band ‘Musta Valo’ [Translation: Black Light]: 26200 Rauma (2014), <https://www.mustavalo.com/>

## Cultural mapping of Rauma and Eurajoki

### The chosen cultural mapping approach: A hybrid paradigm

This section is based on the cultural mapping carried out by the University of Turku Landscape Studies team of the Finnish Lab in Spring 2023. The team has a long and versatile combined experience of cultural mapping and planning, entailing collaborative research, public participation GIS, participatory observation, and community art as study approaches in both urban and rural contexts. The cultural mapping process in the IN SITU project differed from the earlier mappings performed by the team in that these had been lengthy, place-based, and tailored processes, aiming at a holistic and nuanced view of local culture as a way of life unique to a place and securing local acceptance of the mapping results.

In the IN SITU cultural mapping exercises of 2023 conducted by the Landscape Studies team, community reflections and concerns were principally solicited through two Speak Out sessions and a participatory GIS emotional mapping exercise using Maptionnaire. Rather than a cross-section of the rural population of the Lab area, participants were mainly either cultural and creative actors or individuals interested in nature and heritage conservation, which is reflected in their choices and justifications. The perspective provided by the Speak Outs proved limited in the sense that they only covered a small and selected part of the population, failing to convey a fully emic understanding. This was partly compensated by the emotional mapping exercise and the participatory art actions that the team contributed to the cultural mapping independently. The creation of inventories of local cultural assets (NACE and non-NACE organisations) provided new information about the creative sector actors in the region, but the data collection showed a clearly urban bias (the small cities in the region), revealing less about more rural CCIs and their connectedness.

When writing this chapter, the autoethnographic reflections of our team member Marjo Heino, an artist-researcher with experience of lifelong residency in the Lab area, brought more depth to these cultural interpretations. For example, in a workshop for cultural and creative actors, co-organised with the regional authority in March 2025, this provided additional information about community practices, invisible networks of cultural exchange and collaboration, and challenges and aspirations of cultural agents who had not been sufficiently covered in previous rounds of mapping.

As for identifying patterns and themes, developing this chapter provided the first real opportunity for the Lab to pause for analysing and reflecting upon the mapping results. In the future, the IN SITU project's published outcomes will offer valuable comparative perspectives to this at a general level. The interview data from a recent round of consultative discussions (spring 2025) is likely to diversify the local creatives' views on challenges and aspirations, in addition to the earlier focus group meetings.

### **Community reflections and concern: Fragile valued places**

According to our research results, preservation of both cultural and natural sites are key issues worrying the inhabitants of this area. In general, the roles of *Metsähallitus*, the state agency in charge of public lands, and those of both municipalities were highlighted in discussions about protecting, maintaining, and promoting these sites. Local concerns were voiced especially about how to access the sites in the first place as well as about possible increase of their wear and tear, should the amount of visitors grow. In particular, the archipelago has limited access: regular public sea connections extend only to some parts of it and only in the summertime, and distant islands can only be accessed by one's own or a chartered boat, ruling out a substantial part of both inhabitants and outsiders.

Participants suggested that the existing inland cycling and hiking route networks could be woven more tightly as well as customised for different social groups with various needs. Publicly maintained facilities along the routes are seen to leave a lot to hope for. Due to the dense construction of seaside holiday homes, freely accessible seashores on the mainland are also few and far between. Local cultural tourism operators are not seen to receive adequate public support.

People from the area and visiting it appreciate the distinct local dialect and place names, wishing to commemorate them more by signs, public art, or monuments. The cultural and creative actors and active citizens of the Lab area can point out numerous places of emotional and cultural value—places they feel connected with and attached to. As seen and narrated by local creatives, landscape reveals places as anchors for rootedness and also as engines for creative thinking. At the same time, citizens feel their valued places to be in need of care and protection. Satakunta creatives describe both the emotional capital of places—specific emotions and feelings associated with them—and the cultural capital of places—their local history, memories, important place-based practices, and authentic symbolism. Such places of value include both natural and cultural sites and it is in this interconnection of the wild and cultivated nature and human-made environment that the unique aura of the region can be truly sensed.

Natural sites have both emotional value and symbolic meaning for the residents of the region, especially when nature is bordering areas of human activities but is not blurred by them. Eurajoki and Rauma residents value water bodies (e.g., Pinkjärvi, Lutanjärvi, and Kourujärvi lakes) and islands (e.g., Isomaa, Kaunissaari, and Nurmes islands) as well as coastal and forested areas. People visit these sites for well-established everyday practices such as fishing, swimming, picking berries and mushrooms, hunting, and leisure walking. They may remember, for instance, activities of their ancestors working in the

sawmill on the island of Kaunissaari, and folklore and oral histories about hidden forces of nature in different, valuable, and quiet places in the area. They encounter the pristine silence and sounds and sights of the landscape and feel the untimely beauty and diversity of nature. As a participant in Speak Out 1 in Eurajoki (15 March 2023) noted,

*Each place had a story attached to it: talking about a grandfather and being a child—a transgenerational experience.*

Cultural or man-made sites that Rauma and Eurajoki creatives and active citizens signify as special and valued include historical buildings in local villages (e.g., old churches, farms, and houses), manors (e.g., Vuojoki Manor), historic urban districts (e.g., Old Rauma), and archaeological sites of regional, national, and international recognition (including Sammallahdenmäki and the numerous other Bronze Age sites; see Figure 6.3). Rauma and Eurajoki residents perceive the cultural value of these places through the prism of their tangible and intangible heritage. For example, creatives talk about the unique built environment of Old Rauma through the atmosphere of the place that they feel when walking in the area. As a participant in Speak Out 2, in Rauma (29 March 2023) mentioned,

*I have to say about walking among the old houses—Walking in Old Rauma is still such an experience that I can't ignore it, even though I'm used to it. Maybe that is the thing that unites the artistic and cultural people in Rauma.*

**FIGURE 6.3.**  
The 'Giant's Church Floor', the vernacular name for one construction in the large Bronze Age burial site Sammallahdenmäki in Rauma. Photo: Pauliina Latvala-Harvilahti, 2024





The close connection of different heritage aspects becomes especially important when the tangible materialities of places begin to fade with time while archaeological knowledge and oral histories remain, as has partly happened in the Sammallahdenmäki World Heritage Site. People in Satakunta witness the co-creation of cultural, man-made places together with the natural landscape. The history of the people on this land is—at least for those originating from the area—the history of the land itself.

Valued places enhance the sense of place and belonging through feelings of love, joy, pleasure, and pride. People in Satakunta say they enjoy invisible and intimate things, such as the sounds of birds or seeing the well-kept areas. Residents are proud of places with a long history that are recognised beyond the region. However, some places of value are associated with adverse emotions. For instance, residents communicate their sadness, anger, and fear when they see places or buildings in poor shape and neglected. Negative place-based emotions are explained by the lack of interest or resources among the decision-makers in local history or by the waning of the vernacular heritage when it is not maintained and passed on. Residents are concerned about the “invisibility” of the dilapidating old village buildings as well as the disappearing of both the oral histories of the villages and the communities telling them.

This shared landscape of valued places helps explain the nature of a creative and cultural economy that local creatives and active citizens endorse. First, Satakunta residents quite often advocate or imply caring and protection that would largely leave the places unchanged, which might conflict with logics of creative economy projects. For instance, locals perceive that the promotion of places of value and their living heritage through the development of touristic routes and sightseeing brings the risk of reformatting the area so that its aura is lost. Second, the local sense of place relies on a strong human–nature connection,



which residents express when speaking about the natural and cultural sites of value. Such a sense of place links with a caring attitude towards the natural environment, also meaning that the residents wish to use the places sustainably. The right to define the symbolic value and the use of one's own environment can be seen as the primary form of cultural sustainability (Siivonen, 2010).

## State and municipalities: A twin cultural policy framework

To grasp Finnish cultural policy, it is important to understand the separation between state and municipal government. Municipalities have an independent role—also on cultural policy—and taxation rights. The state provides framing legislation that assigns mandatory tasks to municipalities, also providing strategic guidance. Finnish national policy aims both at providing equal cultural services across the country and at building on regional strengths. The Finnish Arts and Culture Agency (Kuvi), a major stakeholder in distributing grant- and project-based funding for arts and culture, used to have regional offices but these have been recently phased out, to be replaced by other regional activities not yet fully formed. The municipalities are legally obligated to enable cultural expression and to provide access to culture for all their residents as a responsibility of their cultural sectors, often co-operating with other sectors and outside actors. The regional councils, again, are joint municipal authorities that, among other things, plan and coordinate the cultural policies in their regions (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2024; Kegler et al., 2024).

In general, the cultural services of Finnish municipalities are differentiating rapidly. In the smaller ones, municipal subsidies to or partnerships with third sector actors, as well as libraries, adult

education centres and comprehensive art education are most important. This contrasts with the heavier state financing of cultural institutions and artistic communities in the bigger centres. This differentiation is reflected directly in the local supply of culture, use of cultural services, and employment of creatives and artists. At the same time, municipalities receive state support for maintaining cultural services, although the real share of culture in the total state support for municipalities is infinitesimal. Rauma and Eurajoki are no exception in this respect (Helve and Holstila, 2024).

A number of private foundations make personal and project grants applicable for cultural activities locally, regionally, and nationally. Otherwise, private support for art and culture is scant in the Lab area. The ongoing economic recession reflects in the foundations in two ways: while their investments may not be yielding profit at usual rates, the amount of applications has risen steeply, as many other sources of income for CCIs have dried up for the time being. This has made securing external financing for art and cultural activities increasingly difficult.

The region of Satakunta strives to make art and culture more accessible in its municipalities, including Rauma and Eurajoki, by means of regional and cultural strategies and projects. The regional cultural strategy of 2022 states culture as a fundamental right, the effectiveness of culture and culture as source of welfare and vitality as its goals. These are to be achieved by supporting networks and partnerships between sectors and municipalities inside and outside the region. However, the regional authority is more an enabler of cultural activity than as its producer or sponsor. International cultural events and the digitalisation of libraries and museums are given as specific strategic objectives. The role of culture in innovation activities is recognised but not elaborated by both the regional authority and the municipalities in their policy texts,

although the regional authority has development projects on, for example, AI in creative industries.

Various national authorities provide state subsidies and grants for some institutions, artists, and cultural associations as well as owners of heritage buildings. Apart from cultural sectors, these may have to do with sectors as diverse as agriculture, business sector, or welfare, the strategic priorities ranging respectively from viable countryside or tourism promotion to the uses of art in welfare institutions. The currently effective Cultural Policy Report by the Ministry of Education and Culture (2017) prioritises the overall prerequisites for creative work, participation in culture, and the foundation and continuity of culture.

The municipalities of Rauma and Eurajoki offer grants for culture, on top of which both have also supported art by offering the use of venues and commissioning public art. Apart from the legal responsibility to support culture, both municipalities see it as an instrument for promoting welfare and strengthening local identities, thus boosting the local image and attractiveness. Cross-sectoral cooperation is thus taking place concerning culture: Rauma has just opened an educational campus with an impressive public art programme, providing work opportunities to several local artists, while Eurajoki employs its artists to produce public art for its new traffic routes.

Recent state cultural budget cuts have affected some cultural activities in the Lab area in 2025, with the biggest impact most evident in the activity of the publicly funded theatres and orchestras and their outreach activities, the privately owned Lönnström art museum, and the RaumArs artist residence programme, all located in Rauma. No major closures have yet taken place in the Lab area, though, and neither do any major events seem to have lost their state support, both of which have happened elsewhere in and outside the region. The cuts have especially affected the younger and/or freelancing creatives, who have hardly recovered from the pandemic restrictions. According to a

national survey, a growing number of artists have changed professions or are considering doing it due to economic insecurity and the perceived low societal appreciation of art and artists. More conclusive studies about the nation-wide effects of the state budget cuts have only started to come out and while the latter have taken their toll on the total working time in the field of culture, they have thus far been partly compensated from other financing sources (Manninen et al., 2025).

Cultural activities in the region are only partly dependent on direct state funding, and municipal funding will stay the same at least for the current budget year. Local amateur theatre activities are run by NGOs subsidised by the municipalities and no significant change is seen to take place there. In Eurajoki, there are no state-subsidised cultural institutions and the municipal funding remains so far unchanged, supplemented by vibrant volunteer activity.

## **Cultural and creative ecosystems: Vibrant and diverse activities with no unifying scheme**

Judging from the cultural mapping results, the cultural and creative ecosystems of the Lab area gravitate to the urban parts of Rauma. Public sector actors such as the municipal state-supported museums, a privately run art museum, and other cultural institutions form a crucial part of the regional cultural and creative ecosystem. Their activities are also concentrated in Rauma. Apart from them, there are a few professional third-sector actors such as Rauma Theatre and an international artist residence RaumArs, and some music groups. In addition, in both Eurajoki and Rauma, there are dozens of local associations for voluntary cultural work for instance on heritage, music, theatre, art, and handicraft activities as well as work with village communities. These are especially important in the cultural and

creative ecosystem of Eurajoki where, for instance, the local museums of the Irjanne village are maintained by volunteers of the local heritage association (a common practice in Finland). Both municipalities financially support some local associations.

Several local cultural events take place regularly in the Lab area. These bring together local communities and provide residents access to cultural activities nearby, as well as attract tourism to the area. The bigger events are usually professionally produced and marketed for national audiences around national and international performers. Rauma organises music festivals and cultural events: its Lace Week in the middle of the summer combines a local, special craft tradition, bobbin lace-making, with other crafts and old market town spirit. A newer event is the light festival Lumen Rauma, presented at the darkest time of the year. International co-operation within the Baltic Region is organised around the Rauma Blue Sea Film Festival and the art exhibition Rauma Triennale Balticum. Music in different forms has been important in Eurajoki for decades. One relatively new example of it is the yearly Eurajoki Bel Canto festival, organised since 2014. As in Rauma, Eurajoki also organises an event of open villages for visitors on one special day yearly. The Krikutilli art exhibitions in Luvia and Eurajoki form a popular and original event every summer (see Lens 2). Altogether, there are 30-odd festivals of different kinds in the Lab area, mostly arts and music festivals as well as other, more local, events.

The City of Rauma has its own sustainable development program to establish the conditions for tourism business development. Cultural tourism development offers important and only partly realized potential for the culture and creative ecosystem. Old Rauma is the chief tourism attraction in the area along with the adjacent section of the Bothnian Sea National Park. Together, they have turned tourism into a growth industry in both municipalities of the Lab area. However, it is difficult



**FIGURE 6.4.**

Krikutilli. Photo:  
Mollu Heino, 2025

## LENS 2

### Krikutilli historic summer guesthouse and art exhibition venue, Eurajoki

*‘Can do otherwise, can think for yourself’<sup>14</sup>*

Luvia has an old historically interesting summer guesthouse called Krikutilli, serving at present as a celebration space and café. For the past few years, art exhibitions have been organised there with a unique concept blending the works of amateur and professionals. The theme of the exhibition changes every year. The exhibition is important both in the Lab area and regionally. Annually, it hosts about 50 visual artists connected to the area. The venue is ‘in the middle of nowhere’ but close enough to the regional centre Pori and is accessible by boat. The number of visitors has been in the thousands.

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14 Text on the floor of Krikutilli, Eurajoki.

to estimate their present impact on creatives' employment, although thriving art galleries and craft sales in Old Rauma suggest there is some. Local experts in culture and creative economy confirm that artists and creative producers are attracted to perform in Rauma thanks to its growing tourist market.

In the non-urban areas, local creative actors maintain that the mutually supportive practices of cooperation among culture and creative actors have a stronger ability to multiply their resources for cultural and creative actions than respective ecosystems have in bigger towns. Connections are not limited to the network of creatives, but the ecosystem also includes other organisations and associations, like schools (see Lens 3), elderly care homes, and even a birdwatching association co-operating with a museum. In the region, artists have innovatively combined art, cultural rights, and a relationship with nature. Wide-ranging partnerships enable, for example, children and the elderly to experience culture for free and to participate in creative activities. In this way, the value of the creativity of residents of different ages is recognised.

The recent crises have had less effect in the cultural ecosystems of the Lab area than in many other locations. No major events have lost their state support, as has happened to internationally well known Pori Jazz, and no art venues have been forced to close due to the cuts like, for instance, several independent theatres elsewhere. As for state-sponsored grants, few in the Lab area have been recipients. The cuts in social security or the raising of VAT may have indirect overall effects on the income of creatives or their local audiences or patrons. Continued worsening of the general economic situation may hit the municipal budgets by diminishing their tax revenue as well as the foundations in the manner described above, potentially removing important safety nets.

### LENS 3

#### Public art in Eurajoki

In recent years, Eurajoki has invested in public art and the “percent for art” principle of public art acquisition has been in use. One example is the *The Sea Crab* roundabout sculpture in Eurajoki, commissioned by the municipality and created by Mollu (Marjo) Heino together with school children in 2023. A new highway bypasses Eurajoki, for which a new roundabout has been built. The municipality wants to profile itself as child-friendly, so the artist engaged local schoolchildren, aged 7-8 years, in the planning process. The artwork was then realised in collaboration with local companies. The yellow crab, a former heraldic symbol for the municipality, is now a visible landmark.



**FIGURE 6.5.** Roundabout sculpture, *The Sea Crab*, copyright by Mollu Heino and schoolchildren of Eurajoki, 2023. Photo: Marjo Heino, 2024



The strong place-basedness of the cultural ecosystems has been noted above and there are no signs of it changing. On the other hand, innovativeness in terms of cross-sectoral connectedness, new forms of cultural and creative activities, or experimentation are not distinct hallmarks of the Eurajoki or Rauma cultural and creative actors. In some cases, one may speak of social innovations co-created with local societies and, in other cases, experimenting with new technologies. There is also a growing trend of internationalisation among the actors in the regional cultural ecosystem, revealed in numerous international collaborations. Cooperation with tourism was brought up by several creative actors but appears to lack institutional backing in the local and regional strategies. The LEADER+ programmes have had some cooperation initiatives, but their creative input may be based on volunteer labour lacking incentive value. Also the lingo of tourism operators and developers is felt to be a bit alien by some creative actors. The CCI-tourism interface is definitively there, has many forms, and needs more attention.

The environment, heritage, and lifeworlds have a strong effect on the work of creative and cultural actors in the predominantly rural Finnish municipalities. In the Lab area, the strong contact between creatives and local communities gives a special, locally based content to the products and working processes of creative actors. Creative actors provide new perspectives to valorising the resources of the unique regional context, for instance, by creating or advancing existing historical and cultural routes with art and creative commercial add-on services. This kind of ecosystem ties together local communities as well as the local cultural and creative actors embedded in them, supporting their connections to the region and their identities in a reflective way. In the ecosystem, a living network of meaningful tangible and intangible local landscapes form a nest for professional creatives and enthusiasts to develop their skills and products.

Tourism is a growth industry in Satakunta and the coastal and archipelago nature are key ingredients in it. The Bothnian Sea, although not exempt from environmental degradation, is relatively pure compared to the South Coast of Finland. This fact attracts domestic tourists to the area—to Pori even more than to Rauma. Accordingly, the regional authority has set its sights on promoting “blue growth” by tourism in the whole region as part of integrated coastal planning. The other side of the coin are the building pressures of the coast, in particular the holiday homes, and the multiplying offshore windpower parks eclipsing the seascape. A major hindrance to coastal and archipelago tourism is the limited accessibility by water: although there are well tended marinas and clearly marked fairways, boat tourists are mostly local, as those from outside the region avoid the area fearing the shallow and rocky waters.

The main engine for cultural tourism, both domestic and international, is undoubtedly the Old Rauma World Heritage site, the biggest tourism destination in Satakunta with its half a million visitors yearly. Outside, it several attempts to invigorate cultural tourism in the non-urban areas have been made, mainly relying on institutionally acknowledged built heritage such as the other World Heritage site in Sammallahdenmäki, Vuojoki Manor, historic villages and harbours, the Galleass Ihana, and the lighthouse and garrison islands. Many of these attempts have taken place in projects initiated by the municipalities or the local LEADER+ group, Ravakka. For instance, the development of the Laitakari harbour area in Eurajoki has so far been a success story. However, the strengthening of roles for the culture and creative industries in cultural tourism is not based on a robust vision but rather on consecutive projects with varying aims. The pandemic has also made a major dent in cultural tourism, which is only gradually recovering.

Both the regional authority and the Rauma and Eurajoki municipalities are committed to sustainable tourism, aware that overuse would

undermine the values of both natural and cultural sites and that the local characteristics of the area are to be respected. Especially in regard to maritime tourism this requires extensive cooperation between different actors to maintain the state of the environment. Specific goals for local tourism promotion are devising municipal tourism development and communication plans, to encourage partnerships between the municipalities and local tourism operators, to prolong the tourist season now limited to summer, and to increase the visibility and accessibility of local tourism destinations, routes, and services.

Cross-sectorality between cultural and creative industries and tourism is not specifically addressed in regional or local policy texts, although in the Lab area cultural tourism is seen as a future opportunity by several creatives. This discrepancy merits further interest, as local CCIs may be involved with cultural tourism on many occasions: heritage conservation, museum activities, events, public art, and art sales. In the region, cultural operators outside the centres are typically small in size and low in capital, often working only part-time or seasonally and lacking contact with a wider spectrum of CCIs outside their niche. On the other hand, CCIs may be discouraged from taking part in tourism activities due to their lack of entrepreneurial skills or simply because of the lack of time, capital, and inclination.

There are demands for some public body to take charge of both strategy-making and permanent co-operation between creatives and other actors regarding everyday practical matters. The LEADER+ groups as local development agencies, the village associations, and the municipalities have the potential for more prominent roles. Capacity building, such as training on grant applications, as well as public investments to invigorate local cultural activity, such as public art acquisition and welfare art projects (with targeted funding from welfare agencies), would be welcome. Finally, local creative actors call for continued monitoring of local culture and creative ecosystem activities and the development

of schemes to draw in cultural investment, including cultural tourism development. Interestingly, though, stronger coordination or integration of cultural and economic policies is not strongly demanded.

## **Cultural ‘creative agents’: Deep roots, strong communities, emerging internationality, and looming austerity**

The artists and creative professionals living in the Lab area or those moving in appreciate the peace and quiet at the end of the forest roads and the vast openness of the Baltic Sea, also understanding that the distances will mean isolation. They are living here and there all over the area. For them, time passes more slowly and nature stays closer.

Living and working as a creative in the rural parts of the Lab area almost certainly means being farther removed from the national artworld than the mere geographical distance would suggest. However, the international activity and appreciation of individual artists is seen to bring international content to the region’s artistic offer. There are very good examples of this in the region. Sometimes, like everywhere else in Finland, artists also need to do odd jobs for living, which some see as undermining strict professionalism. For each of the few professional artists, there are many more amateurs. On the other hand, one may work freely and independently of artistic currents, producing fresh and original art. Local artists and creative workers hold in esteem the nature, the sea, traditional boats, lighthouses, forests, small lakes and paths, worrying about the state of the environment. They tend to have a connection to the area, either family roots or just a workplace or even a berth for their boat.

Professional discussion of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) characteristic for the regional cultural creative

ecosystem shows CCIs resilience and ways to strive. Creative professionals are dependent on a grant system which is limited and competitive or municipal and regional funding for arts and culture which is generally lower than for other spheres. The Satakunta region has a small local art and culture market delimiting possibilities for selling creative products and services to the community.

The artists of Rauma have a strong community feeling that is reflected in the active artist associations. In Eurajoki, for a decade the core of cultural activity has been the Vuojoki Manor, previously a hub for cultural tourism but for now remaining unused. A newer development is the LuviaInside exhibitions in the old wooden summer guesthouse of Krikutilli, bringing together a large number of artists and visitors by the thousands since 2020. Sometimes the local library branch, health centre, or service station may also act as art venues.

The inflows of tourists, other potential customers, are seasonal and localised unevenly (e.g., more tourists in Rauma and less in Eurajoki). In these circumstances, creative professionals cannot downsize their activities to the region; in contrast, they develop their entrepreneurial networks on a national scale as well as international. At the same time, the CCIs recognise that the Satakunta region is strong for its unique and bold cultural initiatives that speak to the local environment and heritage. These are festivals (e.g., Lumen light art festival in winter), place-based activities (e.g., Krikutilli in the Luvia village, which brings together the limited resources of the local community), and traditional events (e.g., Lace Week). People of Satakunta live in tight communities so they cooperate with CCIs or support their initiatives by visiting and spreading the word.

The threats are associated with increasing austerity in the cultural sector due to the national and international economic recession, policy of the recent Finnish government devaluing arts and culture, and budget and grant cuts. Creative professionals are also afraid of the lack

of strategic vision and programmatic action in cultural strategy-making as well as the weakening image of the art professions in the whole, manifested both by the recent state budget cuts on culture and by a negative political atmosphere. In particular, the alt-right True Finns party has portrayed art as “luxury.” (This disparaging trend had already started during the pandemic; see Lahtinen et al., 2024.)

The perceived downsides are the financial precarity of the CCIs, an underdeveloped market for cultural products, lack of marketing skills among the artists, lack of continuity with project financing, and a need for more synergy within the cultural ecosystem. Providing more facilities for artistic work, promoting cultural and art routes, attracting more funding from different sources and networking, marketing, promotion and strategy-making are reported by local creative actors as distinct aspirations for the area. However, threats such as austerity measures, loss of interest in arts and culture among the general public and culture or the exhaustion and aging of voluntary actors in local associations, increased societal uncertainty, and failures of strategic planning are increasingly becoming a new reality in the area as well as in the whole country.

A blissful future conjured up by digitalisation, stabilised financing of culture, cross-sectoral valuing of culture, and partnerships of creatives with municipalities and businesses is envisaged by local creative actors. For this to be realised, solid long-term planning and increased mutual cooperation would pave the way. A more troubled scenario, on the other hand, sees the exodus of professional artists from the area, leaving the field for amateurs and market forces without further involvement from municipalities or state agencies. Whatever public support for culture that would be left would go to the actors established in the bigger centres.

However, CCIs see a number of opportunities for the regional cultural creative ecosystem, starting from improving their own entrepreneurial

and advocacy skills and establishing cooperation networks of creative professionals and across sectors of the creative economy. CCIs also envision temporary cultural and creative activities in free or empty spaces owned by municipalities, which would enable controlled positive gentrification. Artists could cooperate with municipal and business organisations bringing creative spark into their spaces and premises, for instance, schools, hospitals, or supermarkets, taking further previous positive experience of exhibitions in alternative places.

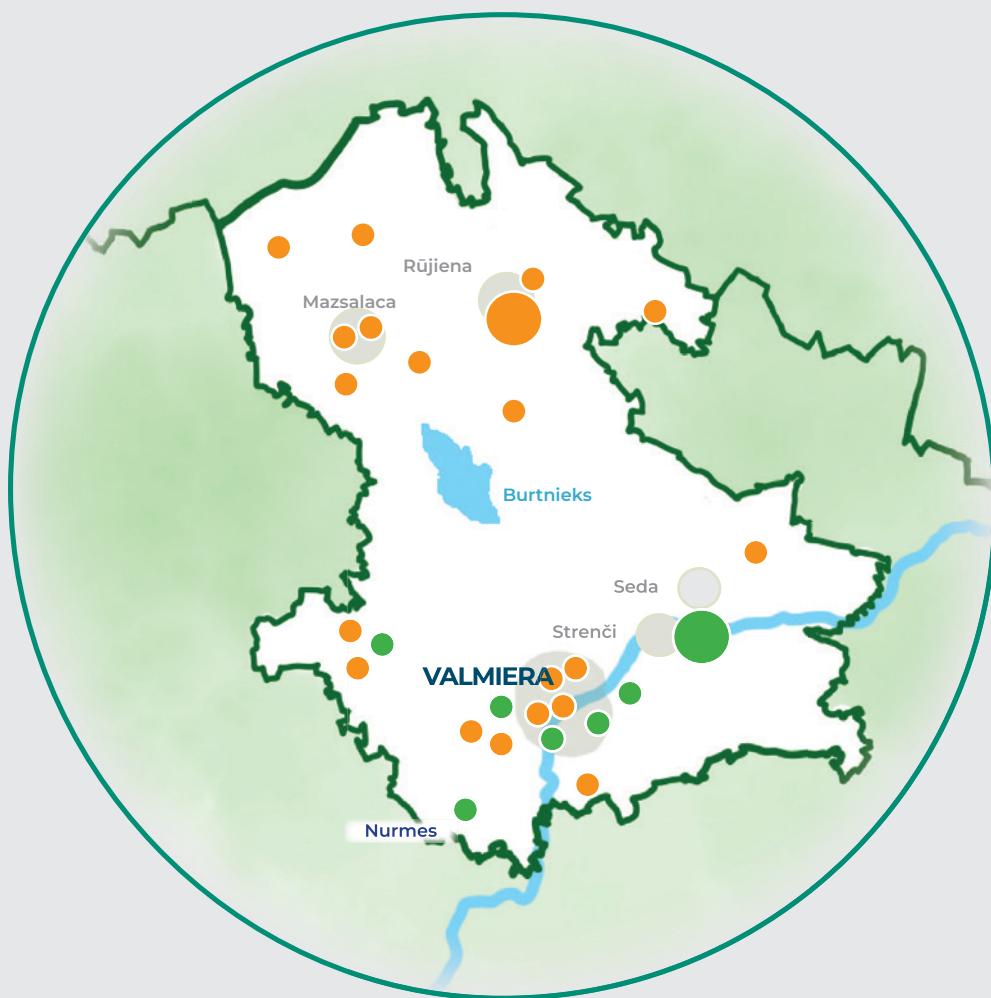
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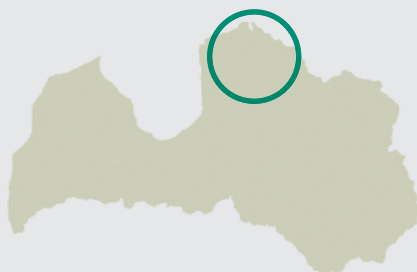






**FIGURE 7.1.**

Map of the Valmiera County IN SITU Lab, Latvia, with main centres, connections, and meaningful places. Map developed by Mollu Heino in collaboration with the Latvia Lab team.



7

# **Valmiera county:** From the traditional to a dynamic region

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Latvia's IN SITU Lab covers a wide geographical area, Valmiera county (Figure 7.1), which was created because of the administrative territorial reform<sup>15</sup> in 2021, becoming the second largest county in Latvia. Valmiera county is a good example of a micro-urban municipality. The city of Valmiera is a city of national significance and one the leading industrial centres in the periphery of Latvia; however, it is also a small city in the European context and only the ninth biggest city in Latvia. The surrounding county area includes several smaller towns and plenty of rural areas. This mix of urban and non-urban territories can successfully offer diverse opportunities and a high quality of life standard for its residents. It also may hint at an answer to the rising concerns of urbanisation and urban agglomeration processes. Valmiera county is diverse in its structure, population density, economic activity, natural resources, and cultural assets. Thus, the county is a good site for identifying diverse models of interplay between urban and non-urban territories and the role of cultural and creative resources in their development. It can offer insightful examples for analysis and models for future development of territories in a broader European context.

Valmiera county is located in the north-eastern part of Latvia, bordering the southern part of Estonia. Valmiera is only 107 km from the capital Riga (about 1.5 hours' drive, according to Google Maps). Because of the 2021 regional reform, Valmiera has merged with the surrounding territories. It brings together four cities (Mazsalaca, Rūjiena, Seda, and Strenči) and 26 parishes, which are small administrative units and include large rural areas. There is a

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15 The administrative-territorial reform of 2021 initiated a transition from 119 local administrative units to 43, which includes 36 counties and 7 cities without county territories.

network of cultural services all over the county. Valmiera county has a total population of 53,486 inhabitants, about half of whom (24,411) live in Valmiera, the county's administrative centre, and 6134 in the other four towns. The population in the parishes varies from 168 inhabitants to about 3000 inhabitants in the parishes closer to Valmiera (PMLP 2024). The population density in Valmiera county is 18 inhabitants per square meter (OSP 2024), which is similar to other counties also located within about a 100 km radius from the capital city, Riga.

In early spring 2023, representatives from the cultural and creative industries in Valmiera county came together to share their visions for the role of culture in their region ten years from now. “A clear and unique identity that innovatively combines culture, entrepreneurship, and natural beauty”; “A significant leap forward to a new level of development, with cultural activity thriving everywhere, and local communities actively participating (in initiating, maintaining, and creating cultural environments)”—these were just few responses to this question in Valmiera. Taken together, these visions fuse culture, enterprise and landscape into a single civic project, which is precisely what Valmiera's *micro-urban* identity makes possible: a small industrial city anchoring a wide non-urban hinterland through dense public cultural infrastructure and active networks.

This chapter tells the story of several juxtapositions which form the unique identity of Valmiera county—from Hanseatic trading crossroads to an aspiring European Capital of Culture, from cultural and natural heritage to contemporary art spaces, from the urban to non-urban territories of the county—on the way to redefining the traditional cultural policy to create a “Dynamic Valmiera.”

## From Hanseatic trading crossroads to an aspiring European Capital of Culture

Nowadays, Valmiera stands for noteworthy economic development in combination with striving to create an attractive living environment for the residents. Accentuating the dynamic spirit of the city and the county, Valmiera's decision to develop a bid for the title of the European Capital of Culture in 2027 can be seen as a continuation of Hanseatic history and its bustling, active, European spirit.

Valmiera's dynamic heritage stems from being an ancient Hanseatic city, one of the cities of northern Europe that ensured mutual cooperation, defence, and trade along coastal and water routes. The trade route to Tērbata (now Tartu in Estonia) and Pskov in Russia passed through Valmiera. The bustle of business and trade; the crossroads connecting Riga, the capital of Latvia, and Tartu in Estonia; Latvia's longest river, the Gauja, which flows across the city and creates a sense of the presence of wonderful nature—these features continue to define Valmiera today and create the character of this unique city and county.

In the Latvian context, Valmiera county is associated with the administrative centre of the Vidzeme region (one of five Latvia's cultural and historic regions). The city of Valmiera is known as an industrial city with a long manufacturing tradition, with excellent sports infrastructure and with nature tourism, ranking among the top 10 tourism destinations in Latvia (see Figure 7.2). In the context of international tourism, the Valmiera county is a well-known and sought-after destination, especially owing to the initiatives of the Gauja National Park Association “Enter Gauja” and the tourism networks “Explore Hanse” and “Via Hanseatica” which are based on cultural and natural values.

The Valmiera County Development Programme for 2022–2028 emphasises industrial and economic development, as well as sports, culture, education, and innovation. It also aspires to create a network



**FIGURE 7.2.**

Valmiera – a bird’s eye view with the river Gauja. Photo: Armands Miķelsons

of towns and settlements in the region to create “an innovative, environmentally friendly, balanced and intelligently managed urban environment with modern infrastructure, affordable and quality housing and services” (Valmiera county, 2022a, p. 11). In strategic documents and public speeches, we can observe a desire to emphasise several traditional development vectors: to consolidate the economic status as one of the strongest municipalities in this respect in Latvia, to create an attractive living environment for residents, and to highlight the county’s achievements in sports, its diverse natural assets and tourism infrastructure. At the same time, in recent years the traditional perception of Valmiera city and county has been evolving.

The year 2021 explicitly marked this change, when Valmiera county applied to become the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) in 2027. Valmiera’s desire to become a European Capital of Culture was linked to the need to transform itself, to become a highly cultural micro-city where culture interacts with a pragmatic economic and industrial tradition. The programme entitled “Dynamic City” was guided by the concept of *conversion* (change of state of a phenomenon), initiating

a series of processes to experience significant changes in thinking and attitudes, developing Valmiera as a micro-urban city, and as an excellent place to live for people interested in culture, economy, and a sustainable environment. Even though Valmiera county did not succeed in becoming the European Capital of Culture, the ideas lived on:

*The idea remains—to find a way to turn the shortcomings into potential. To prove that regardless of the size of the city, the devastation caused by war, the “silicate brick architecture” and the industrial urban environment—all components that do not fall into the categories of “beautiful” or “aesthetic” have the potential for a contemporary and high-quality culture.*  
(Valmiera county, no date)

By formulating the aspirations for transformation through the ECoC bid development, cultural policymakers had received a mandate to modernise the cultural landscape, develop contemporary culture, and engage in international cooperation.

There is considerable ambition in the actions of the county’s politicians, calling Valmiera the “European city of the future” and investing millions in the construction of the Valmiera Industrial Park and the Valmiera Factory and Export Park to attract investors. Recent news headlines show various far-reaching investments and new projects being developed: a large-scale solar power plant has been built in the outskirts of Valmiera to produce green electricity for consumption by local households and businesses; a biorefinery construction in Valmiera is planned; a large military vehicle production plant has opened in Valmiera, etc. Jānis Baiks, Chair of the Valmiera County Council since 2021, has always emphasised a commitment to entrepreneurship and creating a dynamic business environment in his public statements.

The TOP 20 companies in Valmiera with the largest turnover (Lursoft, no date) show a diversified economy, with a mix of high-tech industries



(several glass fibre manufacturers, a manufacturer of innovative metal containers, an installer of electrical supply and telecommunications systems), construction companies, food producers, and others. Valmiera's economic indicators are outstanding for Latvia: among large cities, Valmiera has the highest gross domestic product (GDP) per capita outside Riga, €20,846 in 2021; the per capita value of business output in Valmiera in 2022 was the third highest in Latvia (€24,224), after Riga and Ventspils; the share of employees in enterprises (35.8 percent of the population) was the second highest after Riga, while the unemployment rate (3.6 percent) was one of the lowest. Economists calculate that Valmiera's achievements in attracting investment have been the most impressive in the country. In this respect, the county ranks first in Latvia, with €11.8 million of investment per 1,000 inhabitants attracted over the past five years, even ahead of Riga (€10.95 million) (Kubliņš, 2024).

The development of varied and ambitious economic activities is supported by the presence of different levels of education institutions in Valmiera. Valmiera is a member of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities. Special mention should be made of the Valmiera Vocational Education and Training Centre that offers training for numerous professions, including industrial professions such as renewable energy technicians, mechanical engineering technicians, and industrial equipment mechanics. In addition, Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences offers 15 study programmes at the Faculty of Society and Science and the Faculty of Engineering.

The excellent sports infrastructure in the municipality encourages active leisure and professional sport. Valmiera focuses on high-performance sport and facilities include Valmiera Olympic Centre, Valmiera Swimming Pool, a BMX track, a stadium and athletics arena renovated in 2021, beach volleyball courts, rowing club facilities and Vaidava Sports House tennis courts with a Davis Cup tennis surface, as well as several sports schools for young people.

Valmiera county, like the city of Valmiera, is characterised, on the one hand, by active economic activity and a favourable environment for innovation and, on the other hand, by the presence of abundant nature (including several specially protected nature areas and nature reserves, unique natural monuments and sites). More than half of the territory of the county is occupied by the Biosphere Reserve of North Vidzeme. There are also several natural monuments: five alleys, four dendrological plantations, and 17 geological and geomorphological natural monuments, as well as nearly 900 protected trees. Forests in Valmiera county cover almost 50 percent of the territory.

The region also preserves the historical memory of special cultural and historical events in the context of the whole of Latvia. For example, the national Latvian Song and Dance Festival (now inscribed in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity of UNESCO as a unique Baltic tradition) has its origins in the local singing festival, the first joint concert of Latvian men's choirs, held in 1864 in Dikļi, in the Valmiera area. Today, the cultural and historical significance of Dikļi as the cradle of the national Song Festival is highlighted by the beautiful Neikenkalns Nature Concert Hall, where you can feel the unique aura of nature and cultural history. There are also spectacular environmental attractions, such as the Sound Grove in the canopy of the Silver Grove, where children and adults can make music and explore the sounds of the xylophone, metallophone, wind instruments, and bells.

Valmiera's cultural environment is based on strong traditions, cultural heritage sites (e.g., remains of the city fortress and church dating from the seventeenth century, and manor houses), as well as a smooth network of municipally managed cultural centres, libraries, and cultural education institutions. Alongside the existing cultural heritage assets and strength, the current cultural policies highlight the need for dynamic and future-oriented development. The continuation of the

“Dynamic City” ECoC programme emphasises three objectives (which would significantly complement the existing cultural life): (1) to ensure the availability and offer of contemporary culture in the municipality; (2) to ensure an international component in cultural processes, thus opening up the cultural space of the municipality and the Vidzeme region to new collaborations; and (3) to widen public involvement, especially that of communities and the non-governmental sector, in cultural processes. These objectives are also embedded in the Valmiera County Cultural Development Strategy 2024–2030 which forms a roadmap for the development of cultural life over the next seven years. Thus, the Hanseatic spirit continues to live in Valmiera county—through openness to various exchanges and initiatives, forward-looking ideas and strong development.

## **Cultural and creative ecosystem: From cultural and natural heritage to contemporary art spaces**

We will now zoom in on the operators constituting the cultural and creative ecosystem of Valmiera county, assessing both the strengths and weaknesses of the system, and highlighting the current striving for a “contemporary turn” in the way the city and the county experiences culture and arts.

Valmiera’s cultural and creative sector is diverse and makes a significant contribution to the cultural and economic development of the county. Based on the database of cultural and creative operators in the city and the county created by the authors according to the methodology approved within the IN SITU project (based on data from “Lursoft” databases of enterprises and the Latvian Cultural Data Portal), 359 cultural and creative sector organisations have been identified in Valmiera county in 2023, including businesses, non-governmental

organisations, and public sector institutions. These organisations account for 6.8 percent of all legal entities registered in Valmiera County and the city (5221 organisations operate in the territory). Analysing these organisations and grouping them by the NACE classification system, the majority of the organisations in the sector represent the cultural industry (160). They are followed by crafts (126), and then creative industries (73). We now characterise each of these in turn and point out the specific features of the Valmiera county cultural and creative ecosystem.

## **Cultural industry**

The cultural industry category shows a large public sector presence with a high number of municipal cultural institutions, libraries, and archives. These organisations form a dense network of cultural organisations in Valmiera county, operated by the municipality.

In 2023, the county had 32 public libraries, which were used by more than a quarter of the county's population. According to experts, public libraries are playing an increasing role in society as important community centres: they regularly organise reading promotion activities, information literacy events, media literacy and thematic activities for children and young people, and lifelong learning and cultural education for adults. In addition, 11 branch libraries of Valmiera county act as a single customer service centre for the state and local governments. In smaller communities, public libraries often serve as a community centre and place for meeting other community members either for a practical reason (paying bills or using library WiFi) or for a cultural event (meeting writers or artists).

Museums, in addition to their core function of preserving cultural heritage and building collective historical memory, are also active in building national and local identity, educating the public, and

creating a knowledge society. There are three accredited museums in Valmiera county: the Valmiera Museum, the Mazsalaca Museum, and the Naukšeni Human Museum. In 2023, the Valmiera Castle Cultural Environment Centre opened a new permanent exhibition, “De Woldemar,” which takes visitors into the story of ancient Valmiera, and received the Latvian Export and Innovation Award as the most exportable new tourism product of 2023.

Other cultural heritage sites in the Valmiera region are also a creative foundation for tourism development as popular destinations for locals and visitors of the county. These include churches, inns, manor houses and their parks, castles, ancient tombs, hillforts, castle mounds, Livonian castle ruins, folk buildings, etc. Some of these sites have been granted the status of cultural monument. There are 214 monuments of cultural heritage under state protection, 92 of them of national importance, 101 of regional importance, and 21 of local importance. They are owned by both the municipality and the private sector.

Valmiera county is home to 28 castles and manor houses, which are significant for their architecture and the exquisite beauty of their parks and gardens. Some of the manor houses already function as cultural venues, hosting concerts, exhibitions, workshops, and social events in the gardens and parks. Several private estates have hotels, successfully combining recreation and cultural offers. The municipally owned manor houses are home to institutions of public interest, such as museums and educational institutions, etc. There are other manors and castles where nothing is happening, and their lost beauty can only be imagined. To promote the restoration and activity of manors and castles, the owners and managers of manors have created Valmiera Manor Network, which is based on the ideas and willingness of enthusiasts, workers, owners, and active citizens of manors, castles, and cultural heritage sites to work together.

There are 25 churches of different denominations in the county. Several of these, in addition to their religious mission, also serve as cultural venues, organising exhibitions, concerts, hosting guest artists, and other activities. Thus they may be considered a part of the culture industry. Each year, the municipality organises project competitions and grants funding for cultural and sacred heritage sites. In 2023, for example, 14 projects were co-funded, for a combined amount of €100,000.

The municipality's cultural network is also made up of seven cultural centres with 15 branches. These community centres are located in all major administrative districts of the municipality, providing a venue for a wide range of cultural events and spaces for local communities to participate in amateur arts. In 2023, the cultural centres of Valmiera municipality and their branches together provided 997 cultural events covering traditional and contemporary culture in dance, music, art, and other fields, attracting 233,500 visitors.

Each municipal cultural centre offers local residents the opportunity to participate in a wide range of amateur arts groups—a feature unique to Latvia. Valmiera is also proud to have one of the seven state-run professional theatres in Latvia, Valmiera Drama Theatre.

Thus, Valmiera county is home to a dense network of cultural operators who are engaged in working in the cultural industries. The next major group of operators are active in the craft sector, which constitutes a characteristic feature of Valmiera county composition of the cultural and creative ecosystem.

## **Craft**

According to the researchers' analysis of NACE codes, a total of 126 organisations are registered in the crafts category in Valmiera city and county. Valmiera county has many small craft enterprises, individual craftspersons, and home producers—most often in the horticulture and

beautification, clothing and textiles, and food sectors. A proportion of craftspersons or home producers offer masterclasses in their craft skills, which are often included in tourist itineraries.

NACE coding in the area of crafts, however, groups entities based on the nature of the material used rather than the type of work conducted. Consequently, the majority (52) are represented by wood and furniture manufacturing companies, as well as roofing companies. It should be noted that the majority of craft artists and producers use traditional materials and skills and operate on a modest scale.

Importantly, according to the methodology, the craft category also includes some companies with a very high turnover, including one of the largest companies in Valmiera county, Valmieras stikla šķiedra (Valmiera Glass). The inclusion of such high-tech enterprises in the craft category has helped the researchers, policymakers, and industry leaders begin a much-needed conversation about the linkages between the economic sectors and the nature of creativity. The dialogue between culture and industry has helped propel the evolution of new perspectives on Valmiera's potential.

## **Creative industries**

Finally, according to the researchers' classification, 73 organisations are registered in Valmiera county in the creative industries category. These enterprises are related to advertising and translation services, as well as design and architecture services. Relatively few companies are related to information technology, although the Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences is located in Valmiera and offers study programmes in Information Technology.

Educational institutions, especially those offering arts and culture education programmes, are also an important resource for all organisations in the CCI sector. There are six vocational art and music

schools in the region, located in urban areas (Valmiera, Rūjiena, Strenči, and Mazsalaca). They are mainly attended by children and young people, but adults can also study in the framework of lifelong learning programmes.

To support creative businesses and individuals in Valmiera, the “DARE” co-creation space has been set up with the participation of the municipality—a place to indulge in creative ideas, develop a business, and learn new skills. “DARE” aims to create a cohesive community of creative entrepreneurs and foster the emergence of new businesses. It organises workshops where experienced staff and industry experts offer the opportunity to learn knowledge and skills.

## **Festivals**

The outline of the cultural and creative ecosystem in Valmiera county would be incomplete without mentioning the exceptional network of traditional events and festivals. The cultural mapping process revealed that every small settlement strives to establish its own traditions, emphasising its uniqueness to attract visitors both from other areas and towns of Valmiera county as well as from other regions of Latvia. Examples of such initiatives include the “Race Around Vaidava Lake” (Kocēni parish), “Christmas on Skaņais Hill” (Mazsalaca), “Lake Festival at Lake Burtnieku” (Burtnieki), “Tomato Festival” (Beverīna), “Gauja Rafters’ Festival” (Strenči), “Rūjiena Ice Cream Festival” (Rūjiena), and “Kokmuiža Festival” (Kocēni), among others. Some of these festivals, focusing on gastronomy, geographic features, heritage, and holidays, are mostly local, while others have broader aspirations, thus connecting the local and the external.

Some festivals also raise the profile of Valmiera county in Latvia and internationally. The region hosts various important regular festivals that have gained great public recognition nationally and internationally:



the Valmiera Summer Theatre Festival (see Figure 7.3), the Ērenpreiss' Cycling Festival, the World Drummers' Camps, the Kino Pedālis active leisure and culture festival, the A Cappella Singing Festival, the Valmiermuiža Ethnomusic Festival, the International Winter Music Festival, and others, attracting not only Latvian but also foreign artists and culture lovers to the region.



**FIGURE 7.3.**  
Valmiera Summer  
Theatre Festival – almost  
all performances are in  
improvised urban locations.  
Photo: Lita Millere

## Towards contemporary arts and cultural venues

Overall, the cultural environment mapping of Valmiera county highlights the dominant role of the public sector as well as the prevalence of mainstream culture and art offerings. During the application process in the national-level competition for the title of ECoC 2027, the county developed several substantial bases for the development of its cultural scene, including the field of contemporary culture, and became involved in international networks and partnerships in which it continues to participate.

Several new cultural initiatives were launched within the municipality to flesh out the transformation towards including more contemporary art events and processes to the cultural scene of Valmiera. The Contemporary Art Centre “Kurtuve” (The Boiler-House) was established in 2022 and began operating in the former boiler house of Valmiera

city. The ambition is to become an international interdisciplinary art centre. Meanwhile, it has hosted various arts summer schools, community discussions, contemporary dance events and more. The Valmiera International Multimedia Festival was initiated, and contemporary art exhibitions have been held regularly in Valmiera's urban environment, providing impulses and space for lively discussions of residents, who are gradually learning to accept art forms that are more experimental.

Although there are private cultural initiatives—concerts, festivals, cinema, art workshops, and more—the non-governmental and private sectors in the cultural field remain less visible compared to the activities of the public sector. However, there are several examples where the private sector has been quite successful. One of these is Concert Hall “Valmiera,” established by a private company, home to various cultural events, conferences and festivities. Another is a non-profit organisation “Valmiermuiža Cultural Association” created by a successful local brewery and developing a whole network of local and national cultural events, festivals, and projects. One may even say that this area is a model of place-based cultural development at the outskirts of Valmiera, turning the historical area of Valmiermuiža Manor into a creative cluster.

## Voices from the public

While amateur art and traditional culture currently appear to dominate in the cultural life of Valmiera county, and the main vector of change is towards introducing more contemporary art, the audience is fragmented and there are marked differences between processes in Valmiera city and outside of it.

## Quality of life and ordinary concerns

In order to understand the needs of the residents of Valmiera county, it is important to note that the majority of residents in the city and the county are of working age. These economically active residents constitute the biggest group of cultural audiences and also have a significant influence on the cultural consumption of the younger population—children and adolescents.

Overall satisfaction with quality of life in Valmiera and Valmiera county is quite compelling. The data from the Central Statistical Office survey “Quality of life in cities” (OSP, 2023) demonstrate that 78.1 percent of city residents fully agree with the statement that they are satisfied with living in Valmiera, and 21.2 percent partly agree, which practically does not leave room for negative assessments.

Survey answers from Valmiera county residents demonstrate a high satisfaction with the quality of life as well—87 percent are satisfied (OSP, 2023). Critical remarks refer to very practical shortcomings: the need to improve the condition of streets and pavements, as well as the provision of more green spaces and playgrounds.

Respondents stated that the most important responsibilities of the municipality are creation of new jobs and development of the business environment, as well as the maintenance of roads and streets or the development of education infrastructure. In addition to these tasks, residents expect the municipality to improve communication with the community. This data reflects the needs that arise from people’s daily routines. In Valmiera county, it is certainly not a matter of worrying about natural disasters, or critical socio-economic contrasts. It is a relatively prosperous region, and therefore cultural needs may also find their place on the municipal agenda.

## Culture and self-expression play a role

The ability to satisfy cultural needs is considered one of the factors that may influence the decision to choose a city or county as a place to live; the opportunities for cultural participation may also impact the well-being and quality of life. In Valmiera, the most popular activities to attend, according to a 2021 survey, were city festivals (87 percent), closely followed by theatre visits (76 percent), and attending events at the local community centres (71 percent) (LAC, 2021).

The resident survey carried out in the context of the ECoC bid revealed that different age groups in Valmiera county have distinctly specific cultural preferences, interests, and needs (LAC, 2021). For example, young people feel that there is a lack of open-air concerts and dance events. Older people, on the other hand, want more theatre performances and classical music concerts. At the same time, 88 percent are satisfied with the cultural offer in the city and the county, and only ten percent express critical opinions. Valmiera city residents have particularly praised the city's cultural offer and its beautiful, well-kept environment. It is also important to note the importance of the Valmiera Drama Theatre in the opinion of the residents.

During the Speak Out with Valmiera city residents in April 2023, as part of the IN SITU project, discussing the future development prospects for the emergent contemporary art centre “Kurtuve” (reconstructed by the municipality), the participants emphasised the accessibility of the activities on offer there—so that everyone could “find their muse.” In their visions for the future, residents saw the site as a base for a creative quarter, as an educational space for contemporary art, or as a place for festivals and diverse cultural events, where community, collaboration between different stakeholders (e.g., municipalities and businesses), and interdisciplinary and multifunctional art events could be created.

According to the participants, the city is in need of a place/space that would be freely accessible, shared, multifunctional, and a prominent

tourism landmark. There are unmet needs for community-building, artistic self-expression, life-long education, and meaningful leisure time. Industrial heritage in Valmiera can be put to numerous valuable uses, in the opinion of residents.

These discussions demonstrated that there is an unmet need for life-long education and artistic self-expression, the need for innovative forms of making tangible heritage accessible in modern ways of working and leisure, and the need for community involvement in decision-making on substantial issues. On a more practical level, it was also noted that even in Valmiera there is nowhere for adults to go after 10 pm and not enough entertainment options in general.

### **The voices of the city residents and county residents**

What are the characteristic traits of the current cultural offer in the county and the city? Cultural mapping carried out by researchers within the framework of the IN SITU project confirmed that rural areas in Valmiera county have a good basic public cultural network available in each of 26 administrative sub-units: primarily it is a network of cultural centres and public libraries. Cultural centres serve as a place for a local community to participate in amateur art activities and to attend local cultural events close to the place of residence. Locally organised community festivals are among the top activities for residents according to various surveys (LAC, 2021).

A nation-wide culture consumption and participation study (LAC, 2022) shows that 8 percent of Latvia's residents participate in amateur art activities that form the Song and Dance Celebration tradition: participation in choirs, folk dance groups, vocal ensembles, amateur theatre groups, folk groups, applied arts collectives, folk music groups, and brass bands. Similar activity is present in Valmiera county, and it basically takes place in cultural centres. In 2023, there were 129

amateur art collectives in Valmiera county, including 13 choirs, 19 folk dance groups, 12 amateur theatres, 12 folklore ensembles, 12 vocal ensembles, and other artistic performance groups. These collectives involved approximately 3,200 participants, accounting for 6 percent of the municipality's total population (Valmiera county, 2024). These are people who regularly come together to make music, play the trumpet, sing, dance, perform theatre, or engage in other beloved activities.

Even though amateur art activities are available also to city residents, there are many more activities in the city, especially in Valmiera which has a prominent role providing professional art events for the whole Vidzeme region. Professional theatre or music events, numerous festivals, and contemporary art exhibitions in the Valmiera museum are more accessible to the city residents.

Each of the rural areas strives to develop their identity as a communication and branding strategy, to attract visitors and investors. Numerous local festivals, especially during the summer season, serve the dual purpose of building the local community and attracting tourists as interesting, even unique, places. The cultural mapping showed that rural communities often have established NGOs that help to develop local community events and fundraise for local initiatives. Some creative entrepreneurs have chosen rural areas as their place of living and business; this process can also be characterised as lifestyle migration. They implement cultural and creative initiatives that focus on the reuse of local cultural heritage, sustainable resource management and environment, gardening and food, etc.—all examples of place-based development.

## Towards “Dynamic County”: Redefining and transforming the cultural landscape

The desire for renewal and transformation expressed by cultural policy makers, cultural and creative sector operators and residents became most clearly expressed in the ECoC bid which was developed in a participatory way as it was possible during the Covid pandemic. The bid was not successful; however, the main ideas were transferred to the current *Valmiera County Cultural Development Programme 2024-2030*. The county has considerable potential for transformation, with rich local heritage, traditions, an active amateur art scene, a dense network of institutions, projects and spots of private initiatives. Each smallest settlement has their own festivals and special events, which may point to richness of civic life, but also to some fragmentation. One may wonder, if the recently established county has so far been able to find its joint foundation, a shared identity.

This identity is rather eloquently described in *Valmiera County Cultural Development Programme 2024-2030*, which emphasises the balancing of the strongly developed mainstream cultural offerings and traditions, on the one hand, and the development of contemporary art, on the other hand. The *Programme* says:

*We aspire to achieve a significant transformation of Valmiera county's living environment through culture, becoming a space where a continuous symbiosis between culture and pragmatic economic traditions takes place. We aim to be recognized and acknowledged as a cultural destination in the country, Europe, and globally. To be noticed and acknowledged, we must first recognize ourselves, value and take pride in our cultural traditions, values, and achievements, as well as foster empathy and tolerance towards diversity while being open to other cultures.*  
(Valmiera county, 2024, p. 3)



**FIGURE 7.4.**  
IN SITU  
networking  
breakfast in  
Valmiermuiža.  
Photo: Laura  
Brutāne

There certainly exist some challenges. The cultural development strategy for the coming years particularly highlights two aspects that have been less developed and require focused attention of cultural policymakers: building collaboration both within the cultural sector and with other sectors and fostering bottom-up activities and initiatives of residents, communities, and public organisations.

Various cultural sector actors have different ideas and perspectives on the specific challenges facing the county's cultural field (see Figure 7.4). During SWOT analysis sessions within the IN SITU project, cultural practitioners particularly emphasised that the potential of the creative industries remains underutilised, necessitating the activation and enhanced networking of creative sector individuals, organisations, and businesses. Additionally, the county's cultural specialists believed that the level of resident-driven cultural initiatives was relatively low, as was the number of cultural NGOs. According to them, this highlights the need to stimulate and support individuals and communities throughout the county.

Focusing specifically on the cultural sector in Valmiera city, researchers invited city's cultural and creative sector professionals to share their views on the opportunities, strengths, and challenges in this field. Challenges noted included insufficient funding for cultural processes and events, difficulties in attracting new cultural sector professionals, and a low level of self-initiative among residents. Population decline was also cited as a barrier to cultural consumption, along with limited understanding of contemporary culture. City



cultural professionals highlighted outdated cultural infrastructure (e.g., cultural centres, outdoor stages), limited cultural offerings for families with children during winter, a monotonous concert selection (“we could at least have jazz or contemporary music”), and insufficient capacity among cultural NGOs. They also noted that the city’s audience tends to be quite conservative in terms of cultural tastes.

The IN SITU researchers proposed a collective exercise for cultural operators inviting them to imagine the future in 10 years’ time. Yet the visions of cultural operators revealed today’s concerns—both tangible and intangible. There was a call for infrastructure development, public recognition of their work, and inspiring new plans. For example, professionals envisioned a new cultural centre, resolved weaknesses in the sector, and increased satisfaction with municipal collaboration, and support for securing international partnerships. They dreamt of the city’s cultural and creative sector becoming the leading economic driver in the whole of Vidzeme region, gaining national and international recognition, and offering increased professional remuneration. In the imagined future, regular international-scale cultural events would take place, ideas and support would flourish, and the population would grow, thus cultural products would get more audience. Cultural product quality would be exceptionally high, earning international awards. The cultural operators emphasised that all this would indeed happen despite the city not becoming European Capital of Culture 2027 (which would have helped to mobilise efforts). At the end of describing the imagined future, participants of the brainstorming concluded: “In 10 years, art will be everywhere—in every courtyard.” In other words, the vision of “Dynamic City” would have become a reality.

Professionals in the cultural and creative sector in Valmiera county clearly have a dream, and we as researchers were moved by it. It was evident that the reality of the recently formed administrative unit is more complex than depicted by the statistics and described in the

policy programmes. Local identities and agendas seem to be in some competition, however this fragmentation is actively counterbalanced by county-wide networks of cultural institutions, initiatives like the Valmiera Manor Network, and local entrepreneurship practices. This is a sound basis for hoping that Valmiera county would indeed be able to fulfil its dream of becoming the Dynamic County.

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**FIGURE 8.1.**

Map of the Šibenik-Knin County IN SITU Lab, Croatia, with main centres, connections, and meaningful places. Map developed by Mollu Heino in collaboration with the Croatia Lab team.



8

# Šibenik – Knin County: A story of tender presence and persistence

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The Croatian language typically has five vowels, but sometimes that function is taken by the letter 'r' like in the words *krv* (blood), *crv* (worm), *prst* (finger), or in *Trtar*, the location discussed here, which split into syllables would be *tr-tar*. Trtar is the name of the hill that guards the back of the town of Šibenik, centre of the Šibenik-Knin County. As Joško, the manager of an ethno-village endeavour explained to us during one of the cultural mapping sessions, Trtar is both a “physical and symbolical border within the region.” Everything that is in front of the hill is taken into account, while everything behind it is left to neglect and social derision.

This rough diagnosis rather accurately describes the landscape it hides. Dry and harsh soil rich in stones, with plenty of hills and tremendous water resources, forms a landscape which tells vividly a (hi)story full of conflicts and sufferings, efforts and pains, encounters and disputes. The other side of the hill facing the Adriatic, bathed in sun and sea, and now polished and shiny, tells another story, one that hides its historical struggles much better.

Alongside being a physical boundary, Trtar also hides a more powerful connotation to the present cultural climate. The logic of exclusion does not stop at geography. Journalist, writer, and cultural theorist Jurica Pavičić offers a compelling lens on the cultural dynamics of the broader Dalmatian region. As he summarises, it is a place that historically represents the most powerful multicultural, multi-ethnic and multireligious geography, where Croatian, Italian, Jewish, Serbian, Montenegrin and Muslim populations intertwined, resided and created culture in the same space. Yet, current narratives are trying to reinterpret this multiculturalism and transform it into a monolithic

cultural framework. The geography behind Trtar has lost its former ethnic and religious diversity. It is heavily depopulated, underdeveloped and exposed to neglect. These acts of forgetting people, traditions and cultural diversity are not accidental—they follow the same cartography of neglect that marginalises non-coastal geographies and non-touristic cultural forms. In this line, the hill can also be interpreted in Benedict Anderson's sense as an imaginary line of delineation, a symbolic point of separation, creating a space of inclusion and exclusion (Anderson, 2006). It demarcates who belongs to “the cultivated and cultured society” in opposition to the others.

This chapter sketches out Šibenik-Knin County through its geographical, historical, economic, and cultural characteristics. In the form of a travelogue, it takes us on a geographic tour, starting from the National Park Krka all the way to the centre of the region, the town of Šibenik (see Figure 8.1). This travelogue is a collage of information and insights gathered through original research and consultation with research literature, media articles, and official websites as well as encounters with local residents and conversations with representatives of the cultural and creative sector in the region. Insights and understanding of the state of the art and processes in the region were gained through the comprehensive methodology of cultural mapping, encompassing desk research, structured workshops and discussion sessions, individual conversations and interviews with local actors, as well as the Speak Out session. Stops will be made on the significant spots which represent either historical, cultural, or social landmarks, sometimes converging on all three of them. The aim is to grasp what kind of soil, both physical and metaphorical, is nourishing social and cultural relations in this dynamic landscape. It aims to note cultural heritage specificities as well as new forms of cultural expression that are growing out of it and through this exploration, the intention is to illuminate the various ways in which culture and place are deeply interrelated.

## Landscape through past and present

### Hinterland

We are entering the region from the North passing by the Krka National Park, one of two national parks located within Šibenik-Knin County. The park, encompassing sections of the Krka River and the lower course of the Čikola River, represents a vast and unaltered area of exceptional natural value with preserved or insignificantly altered ecosystems. The Krka River springs from the foothills of the mountain Dinara on the Northeast side of Knin, one of five towns of the region. Knin used to be an important transportation point, especially for the railway during the previous, Yugoslav state. Due to its historic position near the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina, throughout history it was the place of heavy migration as populations fled from Turkish invasions during the Ottoman empire, which lasted for the major part of the Modern Era (1463-1908).

Since the end of WWII, it was exposed to rapid industrialisation and modernisation, and thanks to being one of the important transportation nodes, it was also one of the busiest transition points in the country. But, the end of the 1980s brought internal turmoil and Knin will be remembered in history as one of the initial flash points of the Yugoslav Wars which led to the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic. This veil of decline enveloped the whole region.

Following the Krka River southward, we encounter a sequence of natural and cultural landmarks: the Bilušića buk and Manojlovac waterfalls lead us to the Campus Puljane<sup>16</sup>—a newly developed cultural site on a former military base. This centre offers geological, natural, and cultural interpretation in a peaceful and remote environment.

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16 [tps://www.npkrka.hr/en\\_US/posjeti/sadrzaji/eko-kampus-krka-u-puljanima/](https://www.npkrka.hr/en_US/posjeti/sadrzaji/eko-kampus-krka-u-puljanima/)



Continuing, we pass the Krka Orthodox Monastery and arrive at Roški slap waterfall, before concluding the park's river route at Skradinski buk, where the river meets the sea. Here lies the town of Skradin, known for its rich gastronomy—especially the elaborate Skradin risotto—and its deep historical roots, spanning from the Iron Age and Liburnian periods through Roman and medieval Croatian times. Over centuries, it alternated between Venetian and Ottoman rule until the late 1700s.

Before we descend to the coast and across to visit the region's islands, we will briefly visit Drniš, another town that positioned itself in the middle of the region. It is surrounded by Petrova polja (fields) to the northwest, Promina and Kalun hill on the north, and Moseć on the southeast, and is interspersed by the Čikola river which, after it leaves the town, enters into one of the deepest canyons in Croatia. The first mentions of the town date back to the late fifteenth century in relation to the establishment of a fortress built by the Nelipić family. Over time, the town grew its urban form and gained the status of the centre of the area during the Ottoman Empire, and today encompasses the municipalities of Promina, Ružić, and Unešić. Drniš is renowned for high-quality prosciutto to which it has dedicated an international fair. One of the most relevant Croatian sculptors of the twentieth century, Ivan Meštrović, has his roots in Drniš, where he was born and where he built a monument to his family in the form of a mausoleum and The Church of the Most Holy Redeemer, which is his and his closest family members' last resting place. The monument is in Otavice, a village located about 10 kilometres from Drniš.

Thanks to its specific position, the whole hinterland of the county holds in its memory a rich encounter of cultures, ethnicities, religions, and traditions. In this part of the region, as outlined through the cultural mapping sessions, main cultural actors are folklore associations, whose work is specifically focused on preserving traditional cultural expression. Some activities with a diversified cultural offer can be

found in Knin, primarily with the activities of the town library and club A3but. However, depopulation, poor infrastructure as well as political and social neglect, have a negative impact on the diversity of cultural offerings and the prospect of cultural and creative actors being able to develop their practices.

Some potentials have been detected in the revitalisation of ethno-villages (Solaris in Šibenik, Etnoland Dalmati in Pakovo selo, Eco Campus Puljane) which revive local traditions, crafts and rituals and re-enact lifestyle from the past for the tourists and visitors from the region. The National Park was recently equipped with the Krka Eco Campus in Puljane, a former military complex transformed into a modern education and interpretation centre, with facilities such as archaeological and natural history collections, a volunteer centre, conference hall, and outdoor educational spaces. Focused on children, students, researchers, and visitors interested in exploring the natural, cultural, and historical heritage of Krka National Park, with circular walking trails and guided or independent tours, it offers year-round access. Opened only in 2022, it is yet to be seen what kind of change in the vividness of cultural and social life will be induced by this complex and its diverse offer encompassing natural, cultural, and historical resources as well as providing capacities for various types of activities, from recreational to discursive and educational.

## Coast

While many inland villages—such as Rupe, Dubravice, Konjevrate, Danilo, Perković, and Gaćeze—deserve attention, we are meandering through them on our descent towards the coast. Starting near Skradin, we move south to Vodice, historically known as Arausa. In the fifteenth century, it came under Venetian rule, expanding in the sixteenth century due to an influx of people fleeing Ottoman invasions. Fortifications were built to protect the town, which later shifted to

Austrian control following Venice's fall in 1797, with a brief French interlude. Just across a narrow channel lies the island of Prvić, home to a memorial centre dedicated to polymath and inventor Faust Vrančić (Fausto Veranzio), whose work *Machinae Novae* includes the famous Homo Volans parachute sketch. Across from it is the island Zlarin where the Croatian Coral Centre is located which memorialises the history of red coral harvesting, once the main local economic activity. The Centre is part of the institution Fortresses of Culture Šibenik to which more attention will be paid during a visit to Šibenik. An important aspect of the Centre is its current role in the revitalisation of the island and combining historical, cultural and environmental narratives.

Going back to the coast, north from Vodice, we will briefly stop by the municipality of Murter-Kornati. It is interesting for its national park Kornati, another natural curiosity of the region, consisting of 89 islands, islets, and reefs—sailing through them makes one keenly aware of the continuously changing landscape, from tamed to adventurous, with the sharp edges of the islands which seem like they were cut by a knife. In recent years, these islands have been exposed, together with the Krka national park to heavy touristification that is providing economic sustainability, but is also threatening to endanger the natural beauty to which they owe their status and attractiveness.

Descending southward along the coast from Murter-Kornati, we leave behind the municipality of Pirovac and pass by Tribunj, again Vodice, and Šibenik, to which we will get back a little bit later for an extensive exploration. The tour finishes in the last municipalities on the coastal part—Primošten and Rogoznica. All the towns and municipalities that we encounter through the ride along the coast owe their current viability to heavy touristic activity thanks to their geographical position, which has enabled them to attract numerous visitors. In this process, little attention has been paid to the preservation and development of infrastructure, identity, and recognisability since

the offer is mostly focused on the beauties of the sea and sun. What's missing is a coherent strategy—for content, for urban planning, and for residents' quality of life—without which the tourist offer cannot be meaningfully improved. Therefore, all these places are mostly condemned to seasonal activities and hibernation in the remaining parts of the year. Partly sheltered from such a destiny, are the islands of the Šibenik archipelago, five of them inhabited. Small, both in size and population, all the inhabited islands of the archipelago have been populated at least back into the Middle Ages, but some of them even further into the prehistoric period. They are not necessarily easy to reach, offer little in the way of accommodation and service capacities, which has helped preserve their specific local identities. Although they have been discovered more and more in the past decade, the ratio still plays into their favour.

## Soft and hard cushion for the centre of the region

This layered coastal and inland landscape reflects more than geography; it reveals patterns of migration, neglect, resilience, and identity formation that continue to shape the region today. In a certain sense, the region exemplifies Brubaker's thesis that "diasporas have been seen to result from the migration of borders over people, and not simply from that of people over borders" (2005, p. 3). The region's historical and cultural diversity stems precisely from this configuration, in which borders repeatedly shifted over people in response to changing political constellations. This produced a richness of traditions, rituals, idioms, and ways of life—resources that, on the one hand, offer a potent foundation for regional revitalisation and, on the other, serve as inspiration for developing more sustainable, locally rooted forms of cultural and creative practice.

In its current configuration, Šibenik-Knin County was administratively formed in the early 1990s. For this reason, comparison of the data from the previous periods with the current ones based on the administrative organisation of the regional self-government unit represents a complex task. As we have stated above, after WWII to the beginning of the 1990s, towns and municipalities in the whole region recorded a surge in development with numerous factories, mines, industrial and production plants, shipyards, and a wide variety of economic activity. The Croatian War of Independence stopped this progressive growth and prosperity, and the whole region faced severe setback and decline. In recent decades, tourism and regeneration attempts have put the spotlight on the cultural infrastructure as a potential source of new economic and social activity.

In its current geographical definition, the County has a large number of cultural institutions (47 of them), most of which are museums and collections, with one-third of them located in the town of Šibenik. While the spatial distribution of cultural institutions indicates their concentration in larger urban centres, in rural areas we will find only museums. The region abounds with material cultural and historical heritage with 930 elements recorded in the County. The biggest concentration of the archaeological heritage is in the coastal local communities, while the highest concentration of ethnological heritage is found in the Municipality of Primošten, where three quarters of all the ethnological sites of the County are located.

The Spatial Plan of Šibenik-Knin County records 173 sacred buildings with one third of them located in the town of Šibenik. The cathedral of St. Jacob holds the greatest importance within the framework of the sacral heritage. The cultural heritage of the County is complemented by dry-stone wall landscapes as a historic reflection of the culture of life and work in the Dalmatian karst. From the intangible heritage of the County, traditional dances and singing stand out.

The County is known for its cultural and entertainment events, with 48 of them documented, of which the most represented are artistic (music and stage) events. The largest number of events are held in Šibenik and Vodice, while in nine coastal municipalities there are no cultural events. The most visited cultural events in the County are large (musical) festivals taking place once a year and attracting thousands of tourists from the national and supranational market. Most events are of a musical, entertainment, or cultural nature. The main disadvantage of events in the county is their seasonality which decreases the participation of citizens in cultural life.

Although livelier than the hinterland, the cultural offer in the coastal municipalities is also primarily limited to the local festivals, which take place during the summer season and are mostly dedicated to the tourists and those returning to their places of origin while living in the cities and towns across the country.

Beyond these, an abundance of actors are organised through civil society organisations and associations. In 2022, there were 178 of them in the public registry with almost half of them located in Šibenik.

As concluded through the cultural mapping sessions, libraries are the most important spots of social and cultural infrastructure. Here we will also find folklore associations. The problem that was detected both through cultural mapping sessions as well as through the policy interviews and focus groups, one of the main impediments for the systemic development of cultural offer is related to the precariousness of the cultural actors. Smaller communities are dependent on the initiatives of individuals who function as drivers of a certain type of activity, programme, initiative or alike, but there is no systemic investment which would allow for these initiatives to grow and provide sustainability and long-term impact. Thus, all of these initiatives depend on the enthusiasm of an individual, and once the circumstances change, the initiative disappears. This points to a systemic weakness: cultural sustainability

in non-urban regions remains tethered to the precarious labour and personal commitment of individuals, rather than being embedded within long-term institutional frameworks or policy investment.

Another aspect that was articulated was the question of sustainable and eco-friendly agriculture and industries which rely on the rich water resources and contribute to the regeneration of the employment capacities. A more structured approach to tourism in the sense that it is thematically focused and balanced with the needs of the local population is also pointed out as a desired perspective since the current approach, though crucial for economic growth, represents a serious threat with potential long-term damages.

## **The hill as a backstage: Culture, infrastructure, and reinvention in Šibenik**

The tour of the Šibenik-Knin landscape ends with a visit to the centre of the region, the town of Šibenik, dubbed Krešimir's Town, after the Croatian king Petar Krešimir IV, who was the ruler in the second part of the eleventh century. The town is first mentioned in a document from 1066 by the king Petar Krešimir and is considered the first town established by the local population, as opposed to other towns, cities, and regional centres around it, such as Split and Zadar, which have their roots in the Greek and Roman empires.

The town of Šibenik is geographically defined from the northeast by the hill of Trtar and from the southwest by the arms of the land embracing the port. As the centre of the region, it bears the administrative functions and serves as the heart of economic, educational, and social life. Unlike other coastal towns which are mostly flat, Šibenik's specific urban configuration rises up the hill of Trtar, making it dense, steep, and mystical due to its small, medieval serpentine-like street



**FIGURE 8.2.**  
View of Šibenik  
landscape with the  
St Michael's Fortress  
in the centre. Photo:  
Fortress of Culture  
Šibenik

structure between rows of historic houses and buildings. The central, historical part of the town begins in the northwest end with St. Jacob's cathedral, built in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and included in the list of UNESCO-protected heritage due to the uniqueness in the

construction and decoration which not only followed the developmental trends of its time but also brought in innovations in its construction. On the opposite, south-eastern border of the town the walk will end in Roberto de Visiani's Park<sup>17</sup>, considered to be one of the most beautiful parks in Dalmatia for combining the culture of park design and landscaping. It is rich

in the diversity of Mediterranean flora and commemorates Roberto de Visiani, a renowned botanist of Dalmatian flora who enriched Paduan botanical herbarium with 9,800 specimens.<sup>18</sup>

The upper borders of the old town are marked by two fortresses—Barone and St. Michaels. We will pay specific attention to the fortresses—all four of them, with three located in the town and one, St. Nicholas' Fortress, listed in UNESCO's World Heritage Site list, located at the entrance to St. Anthony Channel. The fortresses have had a unique contribution to the history and urban definition of the town, and have an important role in

17 <https://www.sibenik-tourism.hr/lokacije/roberto-de-visiani's-park/10/en.html#:~:text=Roberto%20de%20Visiani's%20Park%20is,and%20reformer%20of%20the%20oldest>

18 <https://ortobotanico1545.it/en/erbario/the-flora-dalmatica-of-roberto-de-visiani/>



the current development of the town of Šibenik and an even broader geographic scope (see Figure 8.2).

## A brief overview of the past

The urban settlement started growing at the foot of St. Michael's Fortress, which was first mentioned in 998 as a *castrum* and was built to control and defend the entrance to the bay of Šibenik and canyon of Krka River. It represents the dominant point of the fortification system of Šibenik and its walls represent a starting point around which the settlement has grown. At the beginning of the fifteenth century, after the region of Dalmatia was sold to Venice, Šibenik also came under their rule. And with the aim of preventing Turkish invasions during wars between Venice and the Ottoman empire, further fortification systems were built. The plague also had a severe impact on the development of the town, with the one that took place in 1649 having the most dramatic impact on the population of the town and impeding its development for many decades, even centuries to come. At the end of the eighteenth century, after the fall of Venice, Šibenik became part of the Habsburg Monarchy and remained a part of it until the end of World War I. During the first half of the twentieth century, governments and administrations changed rapidly, until it became part of socialist Yugoslavia at the end of World War II. During that period, the economy of the town began to flourish with new factories and plants opening in the town.

This highly industrialised settlement served as a model for the socialist imperative for modernisation, taking little care for natural and cultural riches, and relying on bauxite, coal, and iron ore mines located in municipalities like Drniš and Siverić in the hinterland, which fed the factories. These factories employed numerous inhabitants, guaranteeing solid wages and housing. In the 1980s, the town of Šibenik

had the second highest GDP in Croatia and fourth in Yugoslavia. In addition to the processing industry, Šibenik developed a shipyard for repairs, a fashion industry, and a winery known throughout the country. Šibenik basketball was a Yugoslavian brand with Dražen Petrović, one of the most famous basketball players, who was born there, ruling the floor. The economic boom of the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, was stopped abruptly by the Croatian War of Independence, with the first sparks flying in Knin. The turmoil of war was followed by brisk decline as the town slipped to the bottom of economic and social life in the country. We cannot state that this fate could have been avoided if there was no war and change of regime. The change was inevitable, and it is unquestionable that a drastic one would occur.

This complex historical layering—from medieval power to socialist productivity to post-war neglect—offers both a narrative of decline, and a foundation for new cultural imaginaries and revitalisation strategies grounded in the built environment and community memory. The question, then, is how Šibenik has responded to this rupture—not simply with nostalgia for its past roles, but through the strategic reconfiguration of its cultural infrastructure as a basis for future resilience.

This brief overview of the state of things serves as an entrance into the story which led to the surge of Šibenik and its surroundings, a crescendo of the cultural sector in Šibenik, and the positioning of the town on the international map as a cultural destination.

## Sunrise on the horizon

Šibenik, not being the focus of tourist destinations, decided to find its own path in revitalising rich cultural infrastructure and building a new identity around it. Being asleep for a long time and left out of dominant tourism routes, it started awakening in the early 2010s when

the town developed a strategy to renovate the historic fortifications as cultural spaces (see Figure 8.2). This gradually had an effect on its surroundings and gave support to a slow recovery. Šibenik's steep, historical configuration—once organised around defence and later industrial labour—has been reconfigured through what Lefebvre (1991) would call the production of new social space: a space reoriented toward tourism, cultural consumption, and symbolic visibility.

In many conversations we had, with different people during many encounters in Šibenik when we asked where this love story with culture comes from, The Children's Festival was always mentioned. The International Children's Festival, an annual multi-day festival of children's art and creativity has been organised without interruption since its establishment in 1958, every year in June and July. The festival presents diverse types of artistic and creative expressions, but more important in the story of its impact is the fact that it is happening in the public and open spaces all over the town. For the duration of the festival, the whole town becomes the stage and everything and everyone is surrounded by the arts. Due to this, one of the catchiest promotional slogans—"The City is the Stage"—was coined. But the most important impact of this is that it embedded culture into people's backbone. The generations, at least the ones



**FIGURE 8.3.**

Concert of youth band Aracataca held during the IN SITU conference in Šibenik. Aracataca is one of the most successful bands from Šibenik that gained visibility thanks to the Superval initiative encouraging the youth music scene in Croatia. Photo: Tony Junaković, Kultura Nova Foundation archive

born since 1958, but even the older ones, have grown up with culture (see Figure 8.3). There is probably no child that was born and lived in Šibenik who didn't connect in some way with culture. This is extremely important for understanding how the decision could have been brought to make culture the town's focus and why it was willingly accepted and embraced by the citizens. Of course, the festival went through ups and downs throughout its almost seven decades of persistent presence, but even with all this rising and falling, it stands firmly for all the generations to taste the spirit of creativity. This is, in a certain sense, the foundation of other dynamics which have given additional vitality to the cultural life of Šibenik.

In 2011, the Terraneo festival was established. Marko Podrug<sup>19</sup>, one of the editors of the specialised online publication for music, summarised the festival as “From a crazy idea to the best Croatian festival,” describing how the idea to organise such a musical event in the abandoned military space seemed not only ridiculous, but also impossible. In the end, it turned out to be a highly successful event with the production on an international scale. Although it lasted for only three editions, and did not receive sufficient recognition and support by local authorities, it turned out to be a transformative moment and turning point for the town. It was important in many aspects—putting Šibenik on the cultural tourist map, attracting new types of visitors to the town, presenting musical offers different from the usual ones and, probably most important, in sensitising citizens to contemporary cultural audiences and offerings. It also brought to Šibenik people who would find their new home there, establishing the Azimut club which serves as a creative hub that would generate a new cultural scene in Šibenik. Step by step, all of these events made Šibenik a centre of first-class musical and cultural events. There is also a local joke that the best concerts in Zadar, the centre of the neighbouring region, are in Šibenik.

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19 <https://ravnododna.com/od-sulude-ideje-do-najboljeg-hrvatskog-festivala/>

The next step in the development of the cultural brand was the renovation and repurposing of the town's fortresses into cultural functions. The first one was St Michaels with a tremendous summer stage and auditorium with more than 3000 seats, followed by the fortresses of Barone and St John. More important than the renovation of the fortresses, however, could be considered the establishment of the institution in charge of running them, Fortress of Culture Šibenik, which operates not only the three fortresses but also House of Art Arsen, dedicated to one of the most significant contemporary poets and chant-authors Arsen Dedić who was from Šibenik, and, most recently, the management of the Croatian Coral Center Zlarin, located on the neighbouring island of Zlarin. The unique and irreplaceable characteristic of this institution lies in its awareness that it is part of the community and wider ecosystem, and that it develops together with that community, that it serves it, that it adapts to it, and that it transforms with it. This focus on the local community, context, and actors, with an openness to collaboration and reciprocity, has strongly contributed to the sustainability of the efforts of numerous actors in the cultural scene. This institutional example points in two directions. One side of the coin is how it exemplifies David Harvey's (2000) thesis that post-industrial cities often turn to culture as a strategy of spatial redemption, yet this frequently bypasses deeper questions of equity and memory. Though the outcome of this revitalisation is still to be seen, it might be useful to keep in mind not only the possibilities, but also the limitations of culture-led regeneration. What is more important at this point is another side of this coin, and that is how this institution positioned itself in the centre of the social and cultural life of the town, transforming traditional institutional practices through opening space for cooperation with numerous and diverse actors in its landscape. This immersive strategy that is taken by the institution pushes the boundaries between sectors and opens the space for the new possibilities for the transformation of cultural sectors and its organic impact on the development and sustainability of the town.



**FIGURE 8.4.**

Cultural mapping session with cultural actors from Šibenik – Knin County held in St. John Fortress, Šibenik, on March 7, 2023. Photo: Kultura Nova Foundation

Next to already mentioned manifestations, there is a great number of long-standing programmes such as *Musica appasionata*, *Off Jazz & Blues festival*, *Supertoona* – International Animation and Comics Festival, *Šibenik Dance Festival*, *Evenings of Dalmatian Chanson*, *FALIŠ* – Festival of Alternative

and Left, *The Medieval Fair Šibenik*, and the *Folklore Festival* in Šibenik. There is also a great number of civil society organisations active in the town and their work is characterised by high participation in the social environment, engagement with solidarity in action, the promotion and development of new values, and

with deep understanding of the context in which they operate. They express readiness for learning and active confrontation with the diverse issues of the community.

What was pointed out during the cultural mapping sessions (Figure 8.4) organised in the county was a need for better intersectoral cooperation and stronger support of the municipality in achieving their full potential. This cooperation is also desirable not only on the level of the town, but on a wider regional scale. Until now it could be considered that the cultural infrastructure is in a pretty good state and highly developed, there is a need to strengthen other pillars around it which would address issues of rejuvenation and depopulation. However, it was pointed out in several different situations throughout the cultural mapping sessions that what is most important for the sustainability and regeneration of the region are investments in education and the need for establishing

higher education programmes which would attract new inhabitants but also encourage existing ones to stay or ones who left to return.

## Hidden gems of immaterial present and heritage

This tour has been a way of getting to know where some exceptional initiatives have taken root and are growing together with their communities. And it allowed us to become acquainted with numerous cultural and creative actors that are operating in the Šibenik and region. Part of this ecosystem, together with Fortress of Culture Šibenik, club Azimut and Atribut from Knin, are also actors such as Teatar Sjena, Oxyd, Fotopoetika, Tatavaka from Zlarin, individual artists and craftsmen, small and big manifestations, and a whole variety of offer that is in between all of these actors. Each of them is a special force within their own community, the place where they have put up their tent.

There are numerous actors who are sharing with their own community the little they have and, in that way, making a major difference. They are the fireflies of the forgotten and neglected geographies. They are the lighthouses for the future. What is admirable is the way in which they are working. In conversation with a colleague, she asked me how I would describe how these actors are managing all of this and how they are incentivising the changes they are making. After some contemplation, I summarised it as a “tender presence and persistence.” Everything they are doing is done in a way that is attentive to the needs of others, to the needs of the community they are part of and with whom they are building the more appealing present, and also future, of their community. Their approach is not invasive, it is not forceful, it is not goal driven. It is community driven and it is patiently waiting for their surroundings to accommodate the ideas they are bringing in and taking root in the fertile soil they are standing on because they want

them to take root and make a change. And awareness and change takes time and takes people to partake.

There is both softness and roughness in this region. As is in the analogy at the beginning of this article where we met the 'r' mimicking a vowel, everything that is found in this complex county is a clash of contradictions—there is richness and there is scarcity, there is softness and there is roughness, there are joys and there are sorrows, there is both modesty and pride. And everything that we find there is equally astonishing. These gems that we met at the end of our journey through the region give us hope for a better future for the region and for its people. And their future is culture.

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9

**Reflections and  
emergent insights  
from across the Labs:  
Towards culturally  
vibrant peripheries**

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At the time of writing, *IN SITU* is still in motion. New interviews are being transcribed, fresh maps drawn, and ideas, dreams, and imaginings are being tested in real places. This book has been a space to set down what we know so far: to sketch the contexts of each Lab, share early findings, and reflect on knowledge as it is being made. Our aim has been simple: to trace how the histories and particularities of place—its geology, languages, memories, and infrastructures—shape distinct approaches to cultural and creative development, and to notice the threads that bind these six regions together.

Across the chapters, one theme keeps returning: geography is not backdrop but driver. Chapter 1 framed this directly, moving from the Azores' volcanic uplifts to Finland's Baltic archipelago to argue that landforms forge sensibility as much as settlement, together, land and sea provide the canvas. In the subsequent chapters, this becomes concrete in different ways: Galway's "landscape as storyscape"; Iceland's saga-laden coasts; Finland's clinker-boat traditions and island mosaics; Croatia's hill of Trtar as a line between inclusion and neglect; and Valmiera's river-tied, Hanseatic micro-urbanity.

A second thread is culture's deep embeddedness in place and time. The Labs show layers that are given new agency through contemporary practice: Iceland's living sagas, sung, staged, and reimagined; Azorean narratives that lean into both *saudade* and reinvention; Galway's creative scene drawing equally on marble, waterways, and multilingual lifeworlds; and Finland's careful weaving of intangible heritage with present-day making. These are not museum pieces but working traditions that orient action in the present.

A third through-line is a shared crossroads: culture-making that balances continuity and change. The Azores chapter names it outright

as “a narrative of transformation and continuity ... blending nostalgia and innovation.” Valmiera’s bid-era pivot toward contemporary art; Šibenik-Knin’s fortress-led renewal and its cautions about seasonality and precarity; and Galway’s fear of slipping from “culture making to culture taking”—all capture this unsettled middle. The Labs register hope and constraint in equal measure, from governance gaps to fragile infrastructures to the unevenness of participation.

Finally, perspective matters. Portraits of place are shaped by what we attend to: a literature-forward reading of the Azores, a saga-centred Iceland, a geology-to-policy arc in Galway, a festival-and-infrastructure lens in Šibenik-Knin, a community-choir and cultural-centre focus in Valmiera, and a nature–culture braid in Rauma–Eurajoki. The cultural mapping programme was designed to hold these multiple viewpoints together—combining inventories with humanistic, participatory work so that comparison does not flatten difference. The conclusions that follow take up these common strands without sanding down the edges that make each place itself.

## How this chapter was put together

The chapter was collectively developed, beginning with the perspectives of the research teams in the six IN SITU Labs, who were asked to respond to three questions:

1. Reflecting on the IN SITU project’s experimental methodology, how has your Lab’s approach to culture and creativity evolved, particularly concerning the potential of place-based innovation?
2. In applying a place-based approach to creativity, what unique insights or opportunities have emerged in your region, and what barriers remain significant in sustaining this creative innovation?

3. Looking ahead, how can your Lab further leverage local cultural assets and knowledge to foster creative, place-based innovations that build resilience and drive sustainable regional development?

The detailed and insightful responses received from the Lab teams were compiled, compared, and interwoven, with the texts reorganized according to subthemes that emerged within these responses. Through this process, five key thematic categories emerged: the potential of creative place-based innovation; the challenge of fostering healthy and vibrant cultural and creative ecosystems; building capacity towards long-term sustainability; overcoming fragmentation, limited policy connections, and insufficient support; and evolving research roles and approaches through community-engaged, collaborative practice. Further elaborations and reflections on the responses were integrated into the chapter as similarities and contrasts became apparent. After this process, the Lab teams were invited to review the chapter before it was finalised. In the text that follows, we have included references to individual Labs in parentheses to acknowledge and trace the origins of certain ideas and to provide a more transparent synthesis.

## The potential of creative place-based innovation

Through the personal interactions and site visits within IN SITU's experimental methodologies, we gained a deeper appreciation for the significance of local characteristics, landscape, history, individuals, and community, strengthening ties with each Lab region and specific sites within it. The project's place-based approach has shed light on the resilience and diversity of cultural practices rooted in local contexts, and on the potential to reframe insularity, remoteness, or rurality as a creative asset rather than a limitation. The project has also proven to be

of “unique relevance” for the non-urban Lab areas involved, providing external recognition for the work of local cultural and creative actors in these regions and helping them—and us—understand their position in their own context as well as on a broader scale (Croatia).

The multiple cultural mapping methodologies applied confirmed the importance of a contextually based approach to creativity, sensitive to the changing conditions of the field and the local culture in each Lab area. While not always evident from the outside, through closely observing the richness of cultural and natural heritage, the specific understandings of local culture in the collective memories and experiences of the regions’ inhabitants, and the deep embeddedness of traditions and legacies in its places and people, it becomes evident how these elements underpin a local sensitivity and desire for a cultural presence in their everyday life (Croatia). This reality underpins the importance of cultural expression and activities in each region and, in the Croatian Lab, made the choice of culture as a pillar for regional regeneration and development strategies for Šibenik a natural progression.

Through the IN SITU project, our collective understanding of place-based innovation evolved. We developed an understanding of the value and potential of place-based innovation as it relates to both cultural heritage and community engagement. More specifically, place-based innovation is not only about integrating local cultural heritage into the products and services of the cultural and creative industries (CCIs), but also about fostering social innovation through creative collaboration with local communities. Placing this emphasis on the importance of social innovations in non-urban areas has helped us to articulate and differentiate place-based innovations better, and more fully recognize the agency and potential of cultural and creative actors in non-urban contexts.

Connecting with sociocultural touchstones and capacities provided a valuable anchor for new initiatives. In Croatia, for instance, the Lab-based

research revealed that “reviving and revitalizing communities from their own specific tissue that has sentimental, historical, communitarian, and/or social capacities works best for creating relations, engaging communities and diverse actors.” Moreover, the IN SITU project’s flexible methodological approach supported better understanding of the practical aspects of place-based initiatives, how they are crucial for the local communities, and how these innovations do not have to be or provoke drastic transformations on a large scale to be locally significant (Croatia).

Emphasising intergenerational knowledge transfer and local narratives in programming can strengthen cultural continuity and innovation. When creatively reinterpreted—through design, storytelling, or new media—local traditions can become the foundation for distinctive products, services, and experiences that appeal both locally and beyond. Interestingly, many of these innovations are being driven by newcomers—either from the capital city or from abroad—who bring a fresh, outsider’s perspective that allows them to identify and capitalize on local potential. This highlights the importance of diverse perspectives in uncovering underused cultural assets. Moreover, we are seeing how creative endeavours in rural areas tend to yield extensive advantages for the entire community, mirroring the distinctive character of their place of origin and evolving into integral components of the local identity (Iceland). The interplay of these elements is essential for cultural progress in rural areas.

The importance of the physical location and features, the condition of the environment, the sensitivity to sustainability—these also were contextualising imperatives and sources of inspiration across the Lab regions. The physical geography strongly influences the organization of the cultural and creative sector and the challenges of connectivity, particularly evident in the Azores archipelago with nine islands spread across 585 km of ocean (Calado et al., 2014). Significant efforts are needed to conduct engaged, place-based research across the region, and to build institutional bridges with decision-makers in all the islands.



The need to integrate ecological sustainability and cultural vitality within policies at both local and regional levels was strongly expressed. Their interconnected nature reflects the place-based approach needed for meaningful local and regional development. In Ireland, for instance, the coastal landscape of Galway Bay and the rugged mountains of Connemara carry a quiet energy. This is a region steeped in history, language, and tradition that stirs the imagination, giving rise to new lines of flight whether directly expressed in creative expressions or not. Ecological sustainability is a priority here, especially as the region grows, tying development, culture, and landscape together.

Through envisioning interconnections across landscape and time, what emerged was not a single masterplan but an iterative practice: mapping what is already there, testing modest links, learning from frictions, and returning to adjust the route. By reading sites as layers (ecological, historical, social) we could connect past and present uses, seasonal rhythms, and contemporary cultural activity. Each loop of work—observe, convene, prototype, reflect—thickened the weave: a path tried at small scale, a programme aligned to it, a story added, a policy nudge secured, then back again to refine. In this way, interconnections were made rather than declared, growing from small, feasible steps that could be sustained.

Close examinations and collective discussions in each Lab area identified major historic sites with “clearly unrealized potential” (Finland) and provided venues to collectively discuss the possibility of developing thematically linked cultural routes within a region—and potentially extending beyond it—to develop inter-connecting pathways between specific sites across a region, with related initiatives given impetus by this added attention and cohesion-in-process.

## The challenge of fostering healthy and vibrant cultural and creative ecosystems

Across the Labs we observe the dynamism of local cultural and creative actors. Individual initiatives are crucial—especially when activated and nurtured within a supportive milieu. As the Icelandic Lab has observed, when pioneers possess a clear vision and projects receive community support, substantial progress can be made, leading to significant social and, at times, economic benefits for the community. Collaboration is crucial too, and within the Lab regions there was a strong spirit of mutual support, rather than competition, among creative practitioners (Ireland, Croatia). This was coupled with a desire for further networking and creative exchange both within and beyond the regions.

In the Azores, despite significant challenges—such as geographic fragmentation, low levels of cultural literacy, social inequality, a fragile educational system, and a general lack of strategic vision from regional authorities regarding the cultural and creative sectors—the Azores’ mapping revealed a remarkable and often overlooked opportunity: a generation of young, talented individuals who are eager to innovate. Many of them have gained experience abroad and return with a strong commitment to using culture as a catalyst for local development and social transformation. Furthermore, in the Azores cultural and creative agents are collectively creating a “sectoral movement” and existing organizations (such as MOVA) are engaged in advocacy for the support and strategic development of the cultural and creative sector in the region.

The importance of intra-sector connectivity emerged as a significant factor, as well as often-observed (fragmented) inter-sector collaboration. Across the Lab regions, there is often limited institutional support and collaboration between cultural, educational, and economic development sectors. Relations between the cultural and tourism sectors were also in need of “recalibrating” towards an aligned vision; in the case of the

Finnish Lab, to evolve into a “more synchronised strategic development of tourism and sustainability in the Lab area.” This could, for example, expand the involvement of municipal and regional curators, with an emphasis on both networking and capacity building.

In most Lab areas, inter-sector collaboration is weak; however, where grassroots discussions are fostered among diverse residents for the co-development of collective local development decisions, strategies, and actions—such as in the case of the Icelandic Lab—intersectoral linkages can be built as an integral dimension of collective actions.

Physical cultural venues also played important roles in some areas, providing key meeting and networking places in distributed territories. For example, in the Finnish Lab, a success story has been the Krikutilli exhibition space, which has evolved into a local cultural hub and a meeting point between the local communities and art professionals from different fields, serving as an embedded resource within an ecosystem of local actors.

However, the overall health and vitality of the cultural and creative actors in these regions has been constrained by a “prolonged crisis in the field” (Finland) that started with the financial crash around 2008, intensified with the pandemic, followed by wartime recession pressures and, in some areas, state budget cuts and “a general political climate hostile to culture” (Finland). In general, this trajectory has resulted in closures of organizations and venues and career changes from culture to other fields, in cities as well as smaller places.

## **Building capacity towards long-term sustainability**

Advancing cultural and creative initiatives is constrained by time, people, skills, and fit-for-purpose funding. Project-based finance

compounds this: it delivers bursts of innovation but rarely the scaffolding to keep good work alive. Recent practice guides argue for shifting from one-off projects to capability ecosystems—combining light infrastructure, peer learning, and longitudinal support. For example, Goethe-Institut’s CYCLE UP! project<sup>20</sup> points to practical levers: residency models that align ecological, social, and financial goals; open frameworks and “honest guides” that share case-based tactics rather than prescriptions; and resource libraries that normalise greener production and inclusion standards across partners. Together, these frame sustainability as a mix of programme design (multi-year arcs), operations (lower-carbon touring/production), and governance (shared standards and open knowledge).

A primary challenge hindering cultural and creative actors is the time limitations encountered by the entrepreneurs spearheading their projects. The majority of them hold primary occupations in alternative sectors and dedicate themselves to creative projects in conjunction with their principal employment (Iceland). This results in a cycle of compromises and the juggling of work (and other) responsibilities, project-based short-timeline obligations, and multiple schedules. The lack of time to dedicate to creative projects is coupled with few opportunities to escape this cycle, and to evolve projects into more sustainable models.

Sustaining place-based innovation in non-urban areas is linked closely to building entrepreneurial capacity (Latvia). Many local creators and small businesses lack the entrepreneurial skills, market access, or confidence to turn creative ideas into viable economic activities. Among the pathway to professionalization, three skill areas appear foundational: to start and manage new projects and activities; to develop and market products that are rooted in local distinctiveness; and bureaucratic, administrative and financing matters (Latvia).

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20 <https://www.goethe.de/prj/cyc/en/res.html>

While individuals have different roles and needs, opportunities for collaborations based on complementary knowledges and skill needs have been observed: for example, while traditional craftsmen may require improved digital skills, entrepreneurs may need better understanding of local cultural history (Latvia). Building this capacity may also mean expanding the net for capacity-building opportunities beyond existing creators, but to empower all interested residents who can bring new skills and perspectives to an expanding cultural and creative ecosystem.

To build capacity and resilience, a longer-term perspective is needed, with strategic actions sustained over time. Particular suggestions from the IN SITU Lab teams include workshops, mentorships, and peer-learning opportunities that empower local residents to become active creators; provision of assistance with bureaucratic, administrative, and financing matters; learning through professionalizing collective actions, such as engaging professional mediators, curators, or brokers; and fostering peer networks among rural cultural and creative actors.

Sustainability is also personal. This has been explored in greater detail by colleagues at the National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts in Bulgaria (see Varbanova et al., 2025) and shares much with Susan Luckman's work which reminds us that small-scale creative enterprise runs on "hope labour" and passion—but that endurance depends on sustainable scale, slow/located making, and boundaries around time and income. Her studies of craft micro-entrepreneurship and home-based creative work foreground practices that support well-being: pacing production, diversifying income streams, and designing for work-life balance rather than unending growth. Treating these as design criteria—not afterthoughts—reduces burnout and increases the odds that local creative ecosystems persist (Luckman, 2015).

## Overcoming fragmentation, limited policy connections, and insufficient support

- Recognition has grown, but delivery lags. Across the Labs we meet the same knot of issues: non-comprehensive or outdated strategies; sporadic contact between public authorities and cultural actors; a lack of suitable spaces for creative production, exhibition, and performance; and funding that comes in short bursts unsuited to non-urban realities. The result is a patchwork—restored facilities here, neglected infrastructures there—where seasonality magnifies divides and good initiatives rely too heavily on individual stamina. In several places the distance between municipal offices and working creatives remains palpable; IN SITU has helped narrow that gap in moments, but the structural bridges are far from passable. What the material shows, consistently, is that policy tailored to non-urban contexts is a precondition for sustainability: smaller tranches over longer horizons, lighter administration, mandated forums for regular exchange, and support that covers not only launches but also the unglamorous, humdrum maintenance that keeps things alive.
- Barriers tend to arrive bundled. Access to decision-makers is difficult just as project development help is absent (Azores); conservative policy framings persist precisely where new practice is emerging (Azores); late or limited funding collides with insularity or distance, turning creative energy into burnout (Iceland; Azores); and a cost of living and accommodation crisis threatens to push creatives out of some areas (Ireland; Iceland). Where this bundle is left untouched, opportunities are missed and the sector becomes wary; where it is addressed, we see momentum: officials and practitioners learning together, calendars coordinated, and a sense that strategy is beginning to catch up with lived practice (Latvia; Galway, Ireland).

- The most effective response is connective rather than heroic. Regions need light, durable platforms that map who does what, share resources, and broker collaborations across towns, islands, and hinterlands (Azores; Finland). Without that connective tissue, isolation breeds competition for scarce funds; with it, knowledge circulates and experiments travel. Think public inventories that are actually used (Latvia), peer micro-grants that reward cooperation (Galway, Ireland), and rotating brokerage roles that match people, venues, and funding across the year—not just in festival season (Šibenik-Knin, Croatia). Given limited capacities in local government, cooperation must be designed in: quarterly cross-sector sessions with shared agendas (Finland), pooled admin to unblock procurement and reporting (Galway, Ireland), and small funded roles that carry relationships between cycles (Azores).
- Finally, discourse matters. Updating the way we talk about culture—so that living traditions and contemporary forms are read together—opens space for culture–nature synergies already visible on the ground (Finland). Linking heritage, parks, and conservation with cultural access can yield locally resonant nature–culture routes (Finland), while working under wider umbrellas—biospheres, geoparks, UNESCO designations—helps pool resources while respecting distinct identities (Croatia; Finland). Taken together, these moves—long-horizon, place-scaled funding; regional connectors; designed cooperation; and refreshed narratives—turn recognition into practice. They replace fragmentation with a fabric: not a grand plan, but a set of dependable stitches that hold across seasons and across place.

## Evolving research roles and approaches through community-engaged, collaborative practice

Through a community-engaged research approach, the IN SITU project aimed to extend the “traditional” roles and responsibilities of researchers towards more outward-facing and community-engaged approaches, acting as collaborators and connectors, deepening meaningful and ongoing partnerships, and embracing “knowledge co-creation” processes within the IN SITU Labs.<sup>21</sup> The project encouraged nurturing ongoing relations between universities and research centres, the local cultural and creative sector, public officials and policymakers, and other stakeholders/interested parties. The Labs sought to bridge divides by bringing together diverse stakeholders—artists, cultural agents, decision-makers, planners, and others—through structured meetings and participatory formats such as Speak Outs and the Lab-based Horizontal Networks.

These encounters provided regular spaces for contact and practical problem-solving, helping participants build a shared understanding of local needs and of the roles cultural and creative actors play within “a complex and comprehensive puzzle of different elements” (Croatia). As observed in the Azores, bringing groups that had operated in isolation into the same room stimulated new connections and began to integrate the cultural ecosystem, supporting a more inclusive, non-elitist vision of culture and broadening how the cultural and creative sector is recognised as a driver of place-based innovation (Azores).

Working this way also demanded linguistic care and mutual translation. The Croatian Lab offers a clear example of how terminology shapes access and respect:

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21 This approach was also fostered within the broader construction of the project consortium of partners, which includes not only interdisciplinary exchange among research institutions but also with a European cultural network and a public foundation for independent culture. Exposure to new methodologies, concepts, and perspectives and ongoing internal discussions enriched the development and evaluation of methods in the Labs and the overall project.



*The main challenge we encountered concerned the initial terminology—rural and non-urban as well as cultural and creative industries. We had to use the terms smaller and distant communities in order to avoid misunderstandings and a sense of disrespect that proposed terminology provokes in the inhabitants of this region. In our context, the term non-urban especially has a negative connotation of “less developed areas.” The term industries, on the other hand, does not relate well with the producers who work with limited resources, in constrained conditions, and produce more on a small, craft-type scale—so we used the more palatable term cultural and creative sector. Starting from these terminological differences, it could be said that it helped us delve further into the specificities of the context itself, open discussion, and provide better understanding of the capacities, needs, relations, and experiences of the local actors.*

This kind of micro-adjustment proved methodological rather than cosmetic: it opened doors, improved data quality, and deepened participation (Croatia).

Project activities also catalysed concrete cultural moments that doubled as research devices. In the Finnish Lab, the “RURBAN” visual art exhibition—created by artists from the Lab area during the project—drew on core themes identified by the cultural mapping and subsequently informed reflections on attachments to place (Nenko, 2025). The exhibition showed strong potential to evolve into a recurring international or Nordic event—possibly using Krikutilli as a home base—demonstrating how Lab work can seed durable formats when partners recognise themselves in the outcomes (Finland).

Expectations rose accordingly. Participants increasingly viewed researchers as long-term contributors, not short-term consultants, and asked that relationships continue beyond the project window, including contributions to sustainable cultural policy across municipal, regional,

national, and international scales (Azores). The Azores team captures this shift:

*The Azores Lab has cultivated a close and mutually enriching relationship with cultural and creative actors, which it intends to deepen and sustain. This dynamic has been instrumental in breaking down perceived barriers between academia and the cultural ecosystem, challenging the notion that universities are isolated from real-world issues. Through collaboration, cultural practitioners increasingly recognize the value of academic insight, while researchers are encouraged to engage with concrete societal challenges, leading to a more grounded and relevant understanding of both the potential and constraints of regional development.*

*This ongoing exchange has created a sense of co-ownership in the creative ecosystem. Cultural actors not only feel included in the process but also wish to maintain and expand these relationships, for instance, by recruiting students for projects and co-developing initiatives that respond to local needs. This collaboration points to an emerging model where knowledge co-creation becomes a key driver of innovation and resilience.*

In short, the evolving research role rests on three linked practices—sustained convening, careful translation, and co-produced cultural work—that together build trust, sharpen problem definitions, and anchor change processes in everyday capacities (Azores; Finland; Croatia; Latvia). The roles are still settling, but the relationships are now strong enough to carry the work beyond the limits of any single project cycle.

## From here

Looking forward, IN SITU Lab teams are looking at multiple ways that can further leverage local cultural assets and knowledge for local benefit, from deepening collaborations and partnerships involving local communities, creative professionals, and public sector stakeholders (Latvia); to supporting long-term, co-created projects that align with regional identity and values; to embedding creativity and culture within the development of areas of population growth (Ireland); to fostering peer networks between rural creatives to build capacity and resilience; to advocating for policy recognition and funding mechanisms tailored to the needs of non-urban areas (Iceland). However, in some Labs, a significant limitation remains the absence of sustained dialogue with policymakers. Without political engagement and institutional support, the broader systemic impact of the Lab's work risks being constrained (Azores).

From a research perspective, in applying a place-based approach to creativity in non-urban regions, our understandings of place-based innovation and the potential of culture and creative actors evolved and deepened. Through conducting the cultural mapping exercises and examining the multilayered historical and socio-cultural influences in each place, numerous insights and opportunities emerged. Vibrant arrays of activity and organizations were revealed that provide networks/fabrics of connections, local inspirations and resources, creative energies and skills, and much potential—although significant barriers remain to sustain these practices and engines of creative innovation. Further research relating to longitudinal processes of development and systematisation, co-learning through failures and achievements, and factors of innovation and contextualisation within place-focused cultural and creative work are envisioned—all deepening and building upon the inquiries, discussions, and relations built within the IN SITU project.

Looking ahead, each Lab is envisioning approaches and actions that can further leverage local cultural assets and knowledge to foster creative, place-based innovations that build resilience and drive sustainable regional development. Together, they have been learning about both the challenges that they share and emerging opportunities and strategic approaches that might be activated, informed by new knowledge developed in the course of the project and adapted to the specific features of each area. Facilitating relations between different types of actors remains central to these ambitions, within expanding circles, from local/regional, to national, to international (Croatia).

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