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Expert meeting

Towards a Naples *Biennale* on Cultural Heritage

(Naples, Italy, 21-23 October 2026)

Concept Note

COMUNE DI NAPOLI

UNESCO Naples 2026

Background

From climate change to globalisation, technological advances and rising inequalities, cultural heritage is undergoing profound social, political and environmental transformation. Safeguarding and promoting both tangible and intangible heritage increasingly require holistic, interdisciplinary and human-centred approaches capable of responding to complex contemporary challenges.

Against this backdrop, UNESCO, in cooperation with Italy, organised two editions of the Naples Conference on Cultural Heritage in the 21st Century (2023 and 2025), creating a unique space for dialogue on how to strengthen integrated approaches to heritage and foster greater synergies between the objectives of the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage and the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

The two conferences marked important milestones in this ongoing reflection. In 2023, participants endorsed the Call for Action "The Spirit of Naples", advocating a holistic approach to cultural and natural heritage, tangible and intangible heritage, with communities at its core. In 2025, participants took this vision a step further by calling for the establishment of a regular platform in Naples to serve as a permanent international reference point for dialogue, exchange and innovation in the field of cultural heritage.

Following this, the UNESCO Executive Board, at its 222nd session (October 2025), adopted the Decision 222EX/14, which acknowledged this request and invited UNESCO, in cooperation with the Government of Italy, to explore the creation of such fora supporting the commitments made in the Call for Action "The Spirit of Naples."

The present meeting is a direct outcome of the process launched through the 2023 and 2025 Naples Conferences and further endorsed by the UNESCO Executive Board. Convened by UNESCO and Italy on 21-23 October 2026, this expert meeting will provide an opportunity to reflect on the mission, scope, governance and long-term development of a future regular international forum for cultural heritage in the 21st century. The advice, recommendations and strategic insights generated through the plenary and breakout discussions will inform subsequent reflections by the UNESCO Secretariat and the Italian authorities on the possible establishment of such a forum.

The gap: a missing platform

Over the past two decades, international heritage discourse has progressively undergone a paradigm shift. Increasing emphasis has been placed on people-centred approaches and the recognition of the central role of communities in heritage identification, practice, interpretation, transmission, and stewardship. Heritage is no longer solely understood as a set of monuments and sites requiring expert-driven management, but as a living expression of human creative diversity that is experienced, reinterpreted, and shared by communities across generations.

However, this vision has yet to find expression in a major recurring global event that is both public in scope and genuinely participatory in nature. The existing landscape of international heritage exhibitions is dominated by professional fairs and sectoral marketplaces. Whether focused on restoration, museums, or visitor experience, these events primarily serve institutions, experts, suppliers, and heritage organisations. Local communities, traditional knowledge holders, Indigenous peoples, practitioners of living heritage, and heritage bearers are generally not positioned as central actors.

In other words, the existing international heritage expos ask:
How do we conserve, restore, present, or market heritage?

What does not exist is a flagship international forum evolving around different questions: *Who lives this heritage? Who transmits and promotes it, and how? Who creates meaning around it? What is its meaning in communities and society at large?*

This represents one of the most significant gaps in the current global heritage-event ecosystem.

The foundation:
UNESCO Conventions and the Spirit of Naples

A powerful conceptual foundation for this vision emerges from the convergence of two landmark provisions:

- Article 5(a) of the 1972 World Heritage Convention calls on States Parties to adopt a general policy which aims to give the cultural and natural heritage a function in the life of the community and to integrate the protection of that heritage into comprehensive planning programmes.

- Similarly, Article 13(a) of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage calls for promoting the function of the intangible cultural heritage in society, and at integrating the safeguarding of such heritage into planning programmes.

Taken together, these two articles reveal a remarkable common ground: heritage exists for people, through people, and within people's lives.

The *Spirit of Naples* Call for Action, emerging from the UNESCO Conference on Cultural Heritage in the 21st Century in 2023, builds on this foundation. It calls for moving beyond the acritical separation between tangible and intangible heritage, nature, creativity, and communities. It advocates integrated and innovative approaches that strengthen synergies between the two Conventions and advances a broader understanding of human heritage as a whole.

The proposal: a new international periodical forum on cultural heritage

The establishment of an international Cultural Heritage recurring forum dedicated to showcasing, discussing and advancing the role of heritage in society respond directly to this paradigm shift.

Rooted in the shared principles of the 1972 and 2003 UNESCO Conventions, inspired by the Spirit of Naples Call for Action, and building on the conclusions of the 2023 and 2025 Naples Conferences, the new forum would provide a unique global platform where heritage is presented not merely as something to be conserved by professionals or promoted for tourism, but as something lived, transmitted, recreated, and shared by communities around the world.

The forum should also aim, in continuity with the previous two Naples Conferences on Cultural Heritage in the 21st Century, to give voice to communities whose heritage, experiences, and perspectives are not always sufficiently represented in international discussions.

Naples itself offers a compelling illustration of this vision. It is a city where monuments, urban landscapes, traditions, knowledge, craftsmanship, social practices, and communities form a single interconnected heritage ecosystem.

Combining dedicated spaces for dialogue and exchange with possible exhibition components, the forum would provide a unique platform for innovation, advocacy and collaboration at multiple levels, while offering opportunities for public engagement, knowledge-sharing, cultural diplomacy, and international networking.

Unlike existing fairs and professional congresses, it would:

- Showcase heritage as a living resource that contributes to social cohesion, wellbeing, cultural diversity, peace, and sustainable development;
- Place communities, practitioners, and heritage bearers at the centre of heritage transmission, interpretation, and exchange;
- Promote integrated approaches connecting tangible and intangible heritage and the culture–nature nexus;
- Foster dialogue and collaboration across sectors, bringing together communities, cultural institutions, researchers, artists, policymakers, and the wider public.

In doing so, the forum could establish itself as a leading international gathering for cultural heritage, serving for the sector what major periodical events and expos represent in other cultural and creative fields: a flagship event with global reach and resonance.

Shaping the future forum: the preparatory meeting

To translate this vision into a concrete and sustainable initiative, UNESCO and Italy are convening this preparatory meeting in Naples, on 21–23 October 2026.

Since the proposal for such a forum originated in the collective reflections of participants in the first two Naples Conferences, its future vision and design should likewise be shaped through the active contribution of heritage practitioners, researchers, and community representatives from diverse contexts across the world.

To this end, the preparatory meeting in October is conceived as a dynamic, informal and horizontal exchange to jointly reflect on the mission, scope, governance, and long-term trajectory of a future international periodic forum for cultural heritage in the 21st century. The advice, recommendations, and strategic insights shared by participants during the meeting will be synthesized into an internal report to inform further reflections by the UNESCO Secretariat and the Italian authorities on the potential establishment of such a permanent forum.

Participants have been invited on the basis of their recognised expertise and the breadth of their experiences across heritage contexts, disciplines, and geographical regions, reflecting the richness and diversity of the global heritage community. Invited in their personal capacity rather than as representatives of institutions, they will contribute actively to a collaborative design process aimed at shaping a shared vision and laying the foundations for a future global platform for dialogue, reflection, and innovation in the field of cultural heritage.

Through plenary and breakout discussions, as well as direct engagement with Naples' vibrant heritage and local communities, participants will be encouraged to draw on their experiences and perspectives to explore the guiding questions presented below.

These questions will serve as the overarching framework for the meeting and will be addressed, in the same sequence, through both plenary and breakout sessions. All breakout groups will work on the same questions, ensuring a shared focus while allowing diverse perspectives to emerge.

To promote continuity and collective learning, insights from breakout discussions will be shared in plenary sessions and used to inform subsequent exchanges. Likewise, plenary discussions will feed into the work of the breakout groups, creating an iterative process of reflection over the three days and supporting the development of shared recommendations.

The discussions will be enriched by a range of facilitation methodologies, to be introduced during the opening session, aimed at fostering inclusive participation and collective idea generation.

Guiding questions

Why? What are the most pressing needs, opportunities, or aspirations that such a new international heritage forum could help address?

What? What content and experiences could be showcased and discussed in the forum? What should its scope be to remain coherent while embracing diverse contexts, actors, and practices worldwide?

Who? Who would you imagine as the forum's exhibitors? What cultural heritage rights-holders and stakeholders should the forum engage?

How? How could the forum be structured? How could the forum create conditions for its governance, viability, accessibility, and economic sustainability?

Where? In what ways can Naples' vibrant cultural heritage enrich and support this forum, and the forum contribute to the city and its heritage ecosystem?

When? What frequency, timing, and duration would be most appropriate for the forum?

Practical information

Working language:
English is the working language of the meeting. Every effort will be made to support language accessibility and inclusive participation for all attendees.

Venue:
On 21 and 23 October, the meeting will take place at the Monumental Complex of the Girolamini (Via Duomo 142, Naples), which will serve as the main venue for the event.

Accessibility:
The programme includes several activities that involve a significant amount of walking. Participants are kindly invited to indicate any mobility requirements or accessibility needs through the registration portal to facilitate appropriate arrangements.

What to wear:
There is no specific dress code for the meeting. Participants are advised to wear comfortable clothing and walking shoes, particularly on 22 October. Given that the programme includes visits to religious sites and heritage venues, appropriate attire is recommended.

Climate:
Late October in Naples is generally mild and pleasant, with daytime temperatures typically ranging from 20°C to 24°C and cooler evenings between 14°C and 18°C. The average temperature for the month is around 20°C. On average, October sees approximately four rainy days, making it a comfortable period for both indoor and outdoor activities.

Draft Agenda

Day 1

Defining the vision and purpose of the expert meeting

Wednesday, 21 October 2026

Main venue: Girolamini monumental complex (Via Duomo, 142)

09:30 – 10:30	Accreditation and networking
10:30 – 11:30	Opening remarks and introductory plenary session
11:15 – 13:00	First breakout session: understanding drivers and actors
13:00 – 14:30	Lunch
14:30 – 17:00	Second breakout session: envisioning themes and modalities
17:00 – 18:00	Plenary session: Debriefing Day 1
18:00 – 18:30	Transfer to Rione Sanità district
18:30 – 21:30	The Sanità immersive experience – cultural activities and encounter with traditional Neapolitan cuisine

Day 2

Enriching the reflection through the cultural heritage of Naples

Thursday, 22 October 2026

Different venues in Naples (detailed programme to follow)

09:00 – 09:30	Gathering at Grand Hotel Oriente (Via Armando Diaz, 44)
09:30 – 13:00	Breakout sessions in motion: exchanges with local heritage communities
13:00 – 14:15	Working Lunch at the Santa Chiara Monumental Complex
14:15 – 15:00	Transfer to Palazzo Donn'Anna in Posillipo
15:00 – 17:00	Open session: dialogues with the wider Naples cultural ecosystem
17:00 – 17:30	Transfer to the Darwin – Dohrn Museum (DaDoM)
17:30 – 19:00	Plenary session: Debriefing Day 2
19:00 – 21:30	Walk to the Naples Aquarium and dinner

Day 3

Identifying possible orientations and next steps for a future forum

Friday, 23 October 2026

Main venue: Girolamini monumental complex (Via Duomo, 142)

09:30 – 10:00	Welcome coffee
10:00 – 13:30	Breakout sessions
13:30 – 15:00	Working Lunch
15:00 – 15:30	Cross-Group reporting and convergence
15:30 – 17:30	Final plenary session and conclusions
17:30 – 18:00	Transfer to the Capodimonte Museum
18:00 – 20:00	Cultural performances and visit to the Museum
20:00 – 21:30	Farewell Dinner

We are genuinely excited about the conversation ahead and grateful for your commitment to shaping this future reference global forum on cultural heritage!