

Linear Cultural Heritage and Public Space: Urban Walls Between Conservation and Collective Appropriation

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ABSTRACT

The present contribution addresses the issue of heritage-led urban regeneration through a qualitative analysis of Rome's fortification system, examined as a paradigmatic instance of the transformation of historic defensive infrastructure into a strategic resource for the contemporary city (Connolly, 2015). Three complementary regeneration strategies: promoting of physical accessibility and walkability along the wall circuit; the integrating the fortification system into a network of linear parks; and the supporting of cultural and identity-based appropriation of the surrounding public spaces. From this analytical sequence, a five-principle methodological framework is derived: systemic interpretation of linear heritage, context-sensitive diversification, prioritisation of everyday over touristic use, long-term management sustainability, and participatory governance. Its transferability is understood in analogical rather than statistical terms: Rome compresses within a single continuous structure a range of urban conditions that other European walled cities typically present only in isolated, non-comparable cases; its applicability elsewhere remains an interpretive hypothesis for future comparative research rather than a validated result. Similarly, the observed instances of spontaneous appropriation and community attachment to specific wall sections are read, on the basis of repeated observation, as indicative of a potential for collective identity formation, rather than as an empirically demonstrated outcome, given the study's qualitative and observational scope. The Roman case thus suggests that linear heritage, when supported by contextually informed valorisation processes, holds significant potential for the regeneration of marginal urban areas and the construction of collective urban identity (Ricci, Mariano 2018).

ARTICLE INFO:

Article history:

Received: May 10, 2026

Revised: July 16, 2025

Accepted: July 21, 2026

Available online: Aug 03, 2026

Keywords:

Historical-Collective Identity; Linear Heritage; Public Space; Walls of Rome; Urban Regeneration

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Journal of Mediterranean Cities stays neutral with regards to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations

JOURNAL OF MEDITERRANEAN CITIES (2026), 6(1), 87-107

https://doi.org/10.38027/mediterranean-cities_vol6no1_5

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1. Introduction

Urban regeneration and heritage-based approaches: context and theoretical framework The recent debate on the new urban issue has led to a redefinition of the characteristics of widespread socioeconomic, urban, and cultural marginalization, social inequality, and poverty, which is leading to the obsolescence of the very concept of the “periphery, understood as physical distance and in

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How to cite this article:

Ricci, L., Imbesi, P. N., & Perrone, F. (2026). Linear cultural heritage and public space: Urban walls between conservation and collective appropriation. Journal of Mediterranean Cities, 6(1), 78-107. https://doi.org/10.38027/mediterranean-cities_vol6no1_5

contrast to central areas" (Ricci et al. 2026). Climate change, territorial imbalances, and the depletion of ecological and energy resources highlight, more than ever, a worsening of the structural deficiencies that have characterized the development of Italian and European cities since the early 20th century (Ricci, Mariano, 2004). These fundamental changes, resulting from processes of metropolisation (Indovina, 2009; Oliva, 2010), are bringing about profound shifts in the meaning and practices of urban planning and environmental management, and highlight the urgent need to implement policies, strategies and tools capable of providing integrated and multi-level responses to the physical, social, cultural and economic regeneration needs of the contemporary city (Ricci et al. 2026).

A regeneration strategy, aimed in general terms at "revitalizing problem areas—by addressing issues related to the restoration of natural and man-made environments, heritage conservation, social integration, employment, and economic activities—in urban, peri-urban, and rural contexts" (CE, 2007) and, specifically, to play a leading role based on an awareness of the collective and symbolic value of cultural heritage. The issue of managing urban cultural heritage has made significant progress in recent decades. The theoretical framework adopted refers to the concept of heritage-led regeneration, which has established itself in international urban planning literature as an approach capable of overcoming the traditional dichotomy between conservation and development (Pendlebury and Townshend, 1999; Pendlebury, 2009). In its most recent developments, this approach no longer views heritage as a constraint on urban transformation, but as an active resource capable of guiding regeneration processes that produce positive effects on cities—both physically and economically and socially. In this context, linear cultural heritage is regarded as a multidimensional resource able to contribute simultaneously to cultural identity, environmental quality, social cohesion and economic attractiveness (Gravagnuolo et al., 2019). The Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (UNESCO, 2011) introduced an approach that conceives of urban heritage not as a collection of isolated monuments, but as a layer of meanings accumulated over time, interwoven with the cultural practices of the communities that inhabit and transform the urban space. This theoretical framework recognizes the need to manage change so that new transformations integrate with the values of existing heritage, without denying its historicity or impeding its evolution (Bandarin, van Oers, 2012).

This theoretical premise makes it necessary to clarify, from the outset, how the concepts mobilised throughout this article relate to one another, since their relationship is not self-evident and has rarely been made explicit in the literature on heritage-led regeneration. Linear heritage is here understood as a physical structure that, by traversing and structuring the urban fabric, holds the potential to function as public space: not merely open or accessible space, but space whose meaning is produced through everyday practices of use. When such practices are recurrent, situated and community-driven, they constitute what this article refers to as collective appropriation: the process through which inhabitants make a heritage structure their own, inscribing it with contemporary meanings that coexist with its historical stratification. The appropriation, in turn, is the mechanism through which linear heritage contributes to collective identity, understood as the shared sense of belonging that a community derives from its relationship with a recognisable, shared spatial reference. Heritage-led regeneration, finally, is the strategic and design framework through which public authorities and communities can intentionally support this chain – from physical structure to public space, to appropriation, to identity – rather than leaving it to spontaneous and often precarious dynamics. It is this conceptual chain, rather than any single concept in isolation, that structures the analysis developed in the remainder of this article.

1.1. Linear heritage, research gaps, and objectives

City walls can be classified as linear heritage, a category with specific characteristics that distinguish it from isolated monuments or defined historic districts. Their nature as continuous structures, traversing the urban fabric, conceptually links them to other historical linear infrastructures (e.g., consular roads, navigable canals, abandoned railway lines, etc.), whose conversion into public spaces has seen

growing interest in recent decades, both in design practice and theoretical reflection. In the specific case of historic walls, the heritage dimension adds a further layer of complexity: the wall structure is not merely a disused infrastructure to be repurposed, but a 'document' of exceptional value, requiring intervention approaches that respect its materiality and stratification. It is precisely this dual condition – structures still capable of evoking, in Choay's (1992) terms, the historic landscape of European cities, yet also subject to the practical constraints of contemporary urban life – that makes city walls a critical case for interrogating how linear heritage can be transformed into identity-forming public space without eroding its material and historical integrity.

Structures designed to defend, demarcate, and define the ancient city continue to shape its physical form and collective identity long after they have outlived their original purpose. Yet, by the end of the 20th century, much of this heritage has been progressively marginalized (Xu, Cheng and Li, 2025): relegated to a residual fragment, incorporated into the infrastructural logic of modern mobility, or simply abandoned to silent decay. The tension between the historical and monumental value of the walls and the functional need of the contemporary city constitutes the central problem around which this contribution revolves. This tension raises a question that existing studies have so far addressed only implicitly: whether and under what conditions the same structure that once separated and defended the city can be repositioned as a device of connection and collective use, without this repositioning being read as a loss of its historical authenticity. Addressing this question requires moving beyond a descriptive account of the walls' evocative value, toward an explicit analytical comparison of the strategies through which such repositioning has been attempted.

The scientific literature on urban regeneration guided by linear heritage, while growing, remains fragmented along at least three dimensions, rather than constituting a unified body of knowledge. A first group of contributions addresses linear heritage primarily at the scale of the single monumental segment, with limited attention to its relationship with the surrounding urban contexts it traverses. A second group focuses on comparative or typological classification of enhancement experiences across cities, but without a shared methodological framework linking historical stratification, contextual typology and design strategy within a single analytical model. A third group engages with the theoretical relationship between heritage conservation and adaptive reuse but rarely translates this reflection into operational tools applicable across the highly heterogeneous urban contexts that a single wall system can traverse within one city (Ricci, Imbesi and Perrone, 2025; Vandesande and Van Balen, 2023). This fragmentation is confirmed, rather than merely asserted, by the enhancement initiatives carried out in major European cities with historic wall systems which have produced significant but difficult-to-compare results, due to the diversity of contexts, approaches adopted, and resources mobilized: to date, no systematic comparative framework has been applied across these cases capable of relating the type of urban context traversed (dense historic centre, peripheral fringe, infrastructural corridor) to the enhancement strategy adopted and to its outcomes in terms of public use. It is precisely this methodological gap that this article aims to address.

The case of Rome stands out for the extraordinary complexity of its wall system, the variety of urban contexts it traverses, and the wealth of enhancement initiatives already implemented, but also for the persistence of situations of decay and neglect that make a systematic reflection on the most effective strategies urgent (D'Elia et al., 2022). This richness is what qualifies Rome as a paradigmatic rather than a merely convenient case: the Roman wall system traverses, within a single continuous structure, the same range of contextual conditions – dense historic fabric, consolidated residential districts, peripheral and infrastructural corridors – that other European cities with historic walls typically present only in isolation, distributed across different, non-comparable cases. The transferability sought in this article is therefore not statistical but analogical: Rome is treated as a case in which the diversity of urban conditions relevant to linear heritage regeneration is compressed into a single, internally comparable system, allowing strategies to be tested and compared across contexts under otherwise similar institutional and historical conditions

The built heritage constitutes a system of key territorial reference points that provide a framework, capable of guiding regeneration strategies in urban contexts characterised by physical and socio-economic marginalisation. From this perspective, cultural heritage becomes a key factor in the processes of sustainable and resilient regeneration of the city and the territory (Rotondo, 2016): no longer a constraint or a remnant of the past, but an active resource capable of generating sustainable economic development, innovation, social inclusion, and an enhancement of the residents' quality of life, with particular reference to peri-urban and extra-urban areas traditionally excluded from revitalization policies. This gives rise to the need to develop regeneration strategies on a broader territorial scale, which consider not only urban cultural heritage (which is more layered and recognized) but also its geographical, historical, and landscape-based extension into the surrounding territory, restoring coherence and identity to contexts that are currently fragmented and heterogeneous (Ricci et al., 2023; Ricci et al., 2024).

This article aims to explore the relationship between linear cultural heritage, public space and urban regeneration, analysing Rome's walls as a paradigmatic example of a broader process: the transformation of a historic defensive structure into the central hub of a system of public spaces that contribute to the construction of contemporary urban identity. The specific objective is to identify the most effective integration strategies in the various urban contexts traversed by the wall system and to construct a methodological framework transferable to other contexts.

The research is guided by three main questions: (i) How can historic walls transition from obsolete infrastructure to identity-forming public spaces, while maintaining their historical and material integrity? (ii) Which integration strategies prove most effective in the various urban contexts traversed by the Roman wall system? (iii) To what extent can the Roman case offer insights transferable to other European and global urban contexts? To these is added a theoretical question: in what way does linear heritage differ, in terms of enhancement approaches, from point monuments and delimited historic areas?

1.2. Relevance and structure of the paper

The relevance of this topic can be found at the intersection of several pressing challenges facing the contemporary city: the need to create high-quality public spaces in densely populated urban contexts; the need to promote cultural heritage as a driver of social cohesion and economic development; and the challenge of ensuring the sustainable management of regeneration projects. Cultural heritage assumes a structuring value as a network of historical and documentary landmarks that serves as a benchmark and constitutes a marker for the stratification of the territory, from which regeneration dynamics can radiate out to surrounding contexts as well.

The structure of this paper is as follows: § 2 outlines the methodological framework adopted; §3 presents the results of the analysis of the Roman case study, organised by historical stratification, contextual typology, characteristics of the monumental nodes and patterns of use; § 4 discusses the regeneration strategies identified and compares them with the international literature; § 5 presents the conclusions, including a transferable methodological framework and recommendations for the future implementation of the research.

2. Methodology

The proposed methodological framework is the result of a synthesis process that integrated the findings of empirical field analysis and the documentary analysis with insights derived from a review of the international literature (Clark, 2003; De la Torre, 2002; Liu et al., 2026; Pendlebury, 2009; Wang et al., 2019).

2.1. Case study, research design, and methodological approach

The case study selected is Rome's historic wall system, with its extraordinary complexity and stratigraphic continuity, from the traces of the Servian Wall of the 4th century BCE to the Aurelian Walls of the 3rd century CE, through the subsequent medieval, Renaissance, and papal interventions that progressively modified, reinforced, and reinterpreted the original defensive wall. The choice of Rome as a laboratory for analysis is driven by four converging factors: the exceptional richness and variety of the wall heritage, which offers a nearly complete sample of the diverse relationships between historical infrastructure and the contemporary urban fabric; the complexity and variety of the contexts involved, which allow for the analysis of conflicts and opportunities for enhancement under conditions of maximum heterogeneity; the availability of established enhancement initiatives, some of which have already been subject to critical evaluation in the scientific literature (D'Elia et al., 2022; Perrone, Imbesi, Ricci, 2025); and the persistence, in other sections, of situations of deterioration and neglect that make a systematic reflection on the most effective intervention strategies both urgent and timely.

2.2. Analytical tools and comparative analysis

The analysis of the spatial and formal relationships between the walls and the surrounding urban context was carried out through a typological classification process based on the systematic observation and evaluation of available documentary sources concerning four dimensions (Table 1): (i) the physical characteristics of the wall sections, understood as state of preservation, residual height, and continuity of the curtain wall; (ii) accessibility and usability conditions, namely the presence and quality of pedestrian paths, street furniture, and nighttime lighting; (iii) the quality of adjacent spaces, assessed in terms of the presence and maintenance of greenery, the quality of paving, and the absence of conflicting uses; (iv) the intensity and variety of observed usage patterns, with attention to user types, frequency of use, and the presence of forms of informal appropriation (Do, Fassari et al. 2025). The indicators used across the four dimensions were recorded through direct inspection of sections of the wall, following protocols adapted to the nature of the data: physical indicators were measured or estimated on-site according to specified thresholds; qualitative indicators were classified using an observation form with predefined descriptors; usage indicators were derived from repeated observations carried out at different times of the day and on different days of the week.

The proposed was based on direct field observation and on an evaluative analysis of the available documentary sources – including historical and current cartography, photographic documentation, and prior studies concerning the different wall sections – consistent with the predominantly qualitative and historical-critical approach adopted in this research. This typological classification has been supplemented by a comparative analysis of international case studies on the enhancement of linear historical heritage, selected on the basis of criteria of typological similarity (fortified city wall systems), the presence of established enhancement processes, and their representativeness of different models of physical, functional and symbolic integration within the contemporary urban context, as well as their relevance to the Roman case: these include, amongst others, the Renaissance walls of Lucca and the Roman walls of York.

The walls of Lucca were converted into a pedestrian walkway in the early 19th century at the behest of Marie Louise of Bourbon. Today, with the renovation of the elevated walkway (which runs at a height of approximately 12 meters above the embankments) accessible along its entire length by foot and by bicycle, they represent one of the most interesting examples in Italy of a linear urban park (Aveta, C., Sabatini, P., 2025). The walls of York have been made almost entirely accessible by creating a 3.4 km elevated route that encircles the city center; this is accessible free of charge all year round and is deeply integrated into the city's civic and cultural identity (Wilson, Mee, 2005).

A comparison of the approaches adopted in these different contexts has made it possible to identify recurring principles in regeneration projects and to highlight the specific characteristics (and unresolved challenges) of the Roman case.

Table 1. The four analytical dimensions used to assess linear historical infrastructure, applied here to the Aurelian Walls (compiled by the authors)

Dimension	Indicator	Wall typology
Physical characteristics	State of conservation	<i>Excellent / Good / Deteriorated / Fragmentary</i>
	Residual height	<i>High (>3m) / Medium (1–3m) / Low (<1m)</i>
	Continuity of the curtain wall	<i>Continuous / Discontinuous / Isolated</i>
Accessibility and usability	Pedestrian pathways	<i>Present and equipped / Present but inadequate / Absent</i>
	Street furniture	<i>Adequate / Partial / Absent</i>
	Night-time lighting	<i>Present / Partial / Absent</i>
Quality of adjacent spaces	Presence and upkeep of greenery	<i>Well-maintained / Present but neglected / Absent</i>
	Quality of paving surfaces	<i>Good / Poor / Deteriorated</i>
	Conflicting uses	<i>Absent / Occasional / Widespread</i>
Observed use practices	User typologies	<i>Tourists / Residents / Mixed / None</i>
	Frequency of use	<i>High / Medium / Low / None</i>
	<i>Informal appropriation</i>	<i>Present and structured / Sporadic / Absent</i>

3. Results

3.1. The Roman wall system: historical stratification

Rome preserves traces of multiple overlapping wall systems, built in different eras and for different purposes, which together form a historical and documentary record of extraordinary richness (Esposito et al., 2017).

The Servian Wall, traditionally attributed to King Servius Tullius but likely dating to the 4th century BCE following the Gallic sack of 390 BCE, is the oldest of the preserved Roman walls. The structure visible today is the result of a reconstruction carried out during the Republican period along the same route (García-Hernández et al. 2017), built using blocks of Grotta Oscura tuff quarried north of Prima Porta on the Via Tiberina, after the original defenses had proven insufficient to contain the Gallic invasion. It ran across the seven hills of Rome for about eleven kilometers, defining the perimeter of the Republican city. Significant fragments remain today in several parts of the city: at Termini Station, where a long section has been incorporated into a modern public space; in Cinquecento Square; in the Villa Mellini Park; and in the Viminale area. The visibility of these fragments within the contemporary urban fabric varies greatly: some are highlighted and signposted, while others are practically invisible to the uninformed passerby.

The Aurelian Walls undoubtedly represent the most imposing and best-preserved wall system (Esposito et al., 2017). Built between 271 and 282 AD at the behest of Emperor Aurelian, in response to growing external threats that endangered the capital of the empire, the walls encircled the city for about nineteen kilometers, forming a continuous rampart punctuated by square towers at regular intervals of about thirty meters and by monumental gates at the entry points of the main consular roads. Built of brick with a concrete core, the walls originally reached a height of about six and a half meters, which was subsequently nearly doubled by the work of Honorius (or more precisely, his general Stilicho) carried out between 401 and 403 AD, transforming the previous parapet walk into a covered gallery and

creating a new crenelated walkway at the top. They have survived to the present day with remarkable continuity, serving as a perfectly preserved example of late antique defensive architecture. Their construction systematically incorporated pre-existing structures (aqueducts, tombs and suburban villas) into the wall system, creating a built environment of extraordinary complexity (Figure 1).

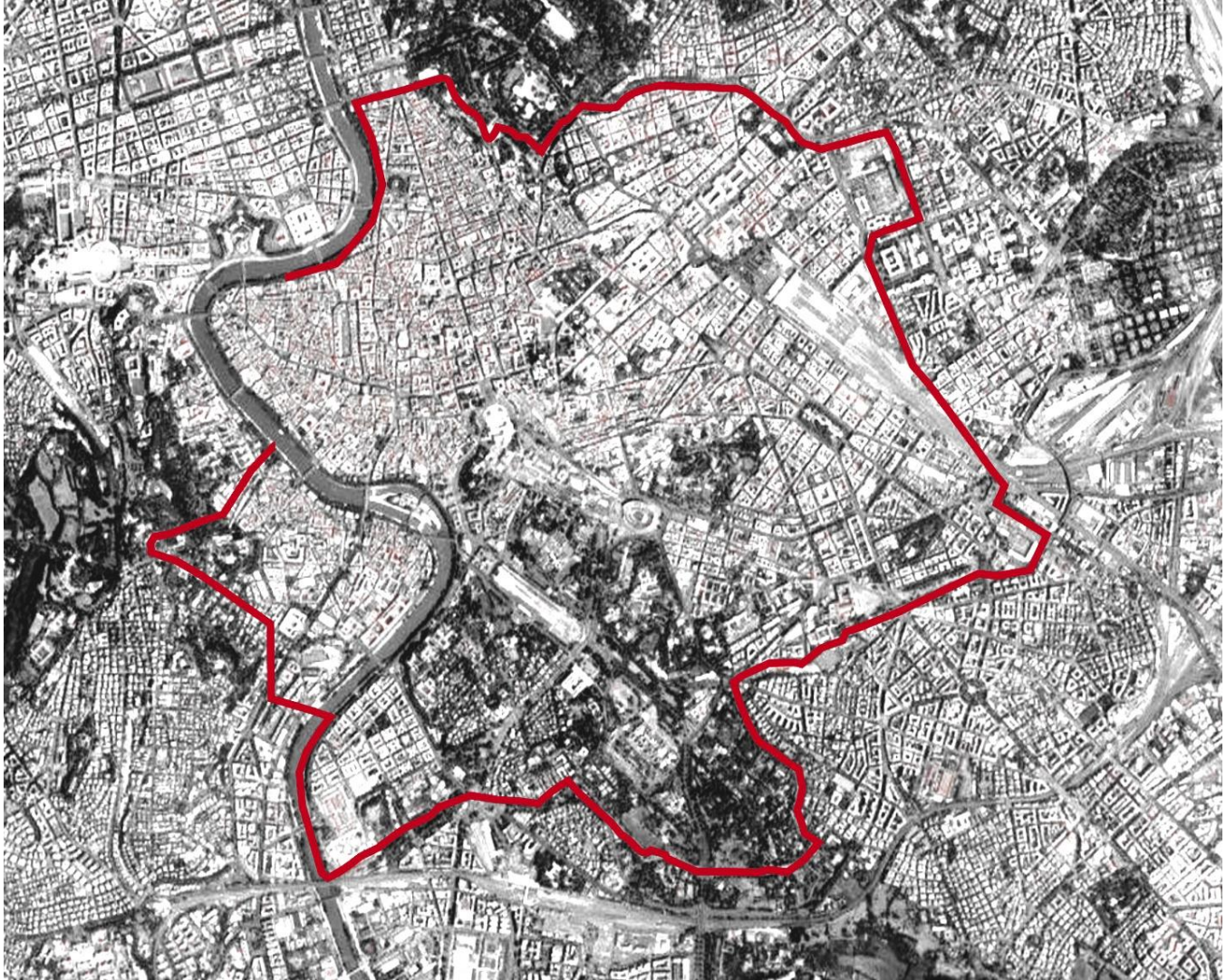


Figure 1. The Aurelian Walls (271–282 AD) traced over the modern urban fabric, showing how the historic perimeter now runs through the contemporary city (authors' elaboration based on aerial photographs)

The Roman wall system also includes elements built in later periods (Molinari and Spera, 2023): the medieval walls that reinforced and modified the Aurelian Wall in some places, adapting it to the defensive needs of a city whose population had declined compared to its imperial heyday; the imposing Leonine Walls, built by Leo IV in 847 AD to enclose the Civitas Leonina around the Vatican in response to Saracen raids, which still constitute a wall system of great significance in the landscape of Borgo and Vatican City; and the Gianicolense Walls, constructed in the 17th century to protect the Gianicolo neighbourhood and subsequently expanded and reinforced in the 19th century.

This layered system cuts through the contemporary urban fabric, creating a sequence of architectural and landscape features of great variety, each with its own characteristics in terms of preservation, context and accessibility. This historical stratification is not merely of antiquarian interest: as the following sections show, the differential preservation, integration and social use of these wall segments today can be read as the cumulative outcome of layered planning decisions, infrastructural pressures and informal practices, and constitutes the empirical basis for the typological classification developed in § 3.2.

3.2. Typological classification of urban contexts

An analysis of Rome's walled infrastructure has led to the identification of four main types of urban context (Horan, Rotondo, 2023).

Table 2. Typological classification of city wall contexts (analytical dimensions from Table 1) and identification of the four types (Barrier, Isolation, Integration and Appropriation). (compiled by the authors)

Type	Physical characteristics	Accessibility and usability	Quality of adjacent space	Observed use practices
Barrier	Walls visible but inaccessible; continuous curtain wall, not passable	Pedestrian discontinuity; difficult or dangerous crossings; absence of dedicated pathways	Illegal parking, unauthorised dumping, inadequate lighting	Marginal use; negative perception by residents
Isolation	Physically intact walls but separated from context; reduced visibility	Accessibility compromised by road infrastructure or surrounding disused areas	Residual spaces, urban voids, abandoned areas lacking quality	Near-total absence of uses; the walls as an invisible element within the context
Integration	Walls enhanced as a structuring element of public space	Equipped pedestrian and cycling paths; adequate lighting; signage	Well-maintained greenery, quality street furniture, adequate paving	Regular and varied footfall; everyday uses by residents and tourists
Appropriation	Walls as physical and symbolic backdrop to informal everyday practices	Variable accessibility; often without formal enhancement interventions	Spaces spontaneously transformed as an extension of domestic space	Informal user communities; jogging, play, etc.; recurrent and identity-forming uses

The first type, defined as the “barrier,” includes sections where the walls still function today as a dividing element between different urban areas, creating discontinuities in the pedestrian network and making it difficult to cross. In these areas, the walls are mainly perceived as an obstacle to the movement of pedestrians and cyclists, and the surrounding area often shows signs of neglect (for example, unauthorised parking, unauthorised storage, and inadequate lighting).

The second type, the “isolation” type, includes sections where the walls are physically separated from the surrounding urban fabric by vacant lots, abandoned areas, or large-scale road infrastructure, which drastically reduce their visibility and accessibility. In these cases, the walls exist as isolated objects in a context lacking in urban quality.

The third type, “integration”, encompasses sections where the walls have been incorporated into a system of high-quality public spaces, featuring well-equipped pedestrian and bicycle paths, well-maintained green spaces, adequate lighting, and quality street furniture. In these sections, the presence of the walls positively contributes to the quality of public space, offering a highly evocative architectural backdrop for residents' daily activities.

The fourth type, “appropriation”, includes sections where the local community has developed informal uses and practices of spontaneous appropriation, even in the absence of formalised initiatives to enhance the area. In such instances, the evocative power and physical presence of the walls have given rise to a process of informal appropriation by residents, who have transformed the adjacent spaces into extensions of their everyday living spaces.

“Barrier” and “isolation” are defined primarily by physical-spatial criteria – respectively, the disruption of pedestrian connectivity and the physical detachment of the wall from the surrounding urban fabric – whereas “integration” and “appropriation” describe two analytically distinct dimensions of the relationship between the walls and public space (Figure 2): integration denotes a formal, design-driven condition, in which planned interventions (paths, lighting, green space, furniture) have produced a high-quality public space; appropriation denotes an informal, bottom-up condition, in which use and attachment emerge from residents' spontaneous practices, independently of (and at times despite) the absence of formal design interventions. The two categories are therefore not mutually exclusive: a well-integrated section may also display appropriation practices, and appropriation can occur even in physically unenhanced (barrier or isolation) contexts. Table 2 reports the classification adopted together with the indicators supporting it.

3.3. Spatial distribution and analysis of nodes

Based on the observational protocol described above, the distribution of the four contextual types along the perimeter of the Aurelian Walls shows a markedly uneven pattern, reflecting the layering of enhancement projects carried out over time and the varying degrees of urban pressure exerted by the surrounding neighbourhoods. The best-integrated sections are concentrated in the area of the Gianicolensi Walls Park and in certain sectors of the Celio and the Appia Antica, where the walls are surrounded by high-quality urban green spaces and well-equipped pedestrian paths that allow for continuous and varied use, with a mix of residents, athletes, and visitors attesting to its vitality as a public space. The most critical sections, on the other hand, are located in the eastern areas of the city, between Nomentano and Tiburtina, where the walls are often reduced to a backdrop for industrial or degraded residential areas, lacking any enhancement of the adjacent public space: the direct contact between the built environment and the wall system appears associated, on the basis of the observational evidence collected, with situations of physical compression and perceptual degradation that may compromise both the legibility and the usability of the walls.



Figure 2. The four types of relationship between the Aurelian Walls and their surrounding urban context: Barrier, Isolation, Integration, and Appropriation (developed by the authors)

The monumental nodes (gates and towers) constitute the points of greatest architectural quality and highest identity recognition within the entire wall system. The main gates – the most significant of which are Porta San Sebastiano, Porta San Paolo, Porta Maggiore, Porta Pia, Porta del Popolo and Porta San Giovanni – have generally undergone more systematic restoration and improvement work and are now the points of greatest tourist influx and most intensive social use. The towers, distributed at regular intervals along the walls, represent, on the other hand, an architectural heritage of remarkable quality but one whose enhancement remains largely incomplete: many have been incorporated over time into residential or private buildings, rendering them effectively inaccessible to the public; some are undergoing restoration and controlled opening, such as those along the route of the Museum of the Walls at Porta San Sebastiano; many others remain visible from the outside but inaccessible, presenting themselves as a heritage site with potential for activation through controlled access programs and uses compatible with conservation (Figure 3).

The Museum of the Walls, housed in the Porta San Sebastiano building and along a long stretch of the top walkway of the Aurelian Walls, represents the most successful attempt to open the wall structures to public use in their three-dimensional form. The walkway route offers a unique perspective on the city, allowing visitors to experience Rome from atop the city walls in a spatial relationship that reverses the

usual viewpoint and reveals the urban topography with extraordinary clarity. This mode of vertical exploration – which allows visitors to experience the structure from within and from above, revealing the defensive logic and scale of the work – is among the most promising approaches for enhancing the walls as a public space, as it combines the museum experience with experiential and landscape elements in a way that is difficult to replicate through other means.



Figure 3. Two of the most significant gates along Walls: Porta San Sebastiano (275 AD) and Porta San Giovanni, added later (16th century) (illustration by the authors)

3.4. Practices of use and spontaneous appropriations

Systematic observation of practices of use along the Roman walls has revealed a rich and varied picture, encompassing both planned and formal uses and the spontaneous appropriations generated

by the evocative power and physicality of the walled heritage. The former includes visits to the Museum of the Walls, cultural events organised along or near the walls (concerts, theatre performances, film screenings, temporary exhibitions) and sporting activities in the adjacent parks. The latter include jogging and cycling along the footpaths, climbing on certain sections of the towers, informal use of the adjacent lawns for picnics and play, and street art on some of the less-monitored parts of the city walls.

In the parts that can be safely accessed, the greenery is well-maintained and the perceived safety is adequate, there is regular and socially diverse use, with the simultaneous presence of children, the elderly, sports enthusiasts and tourists: a density and variety of uses that Whyte (1980) would have recognised as reliable indicators of the quality of public space.

In run-down or underserved areas, however, the walls are ignored by the vast majority of passers-by or only marginally frequented by specific groups of users, which is consistent with the argument that the physical quality of the adjacent spaces is crucial to unlocking the heritage's potential to foster a sense of identity (Labadi, Logan 2015).

One element of particular interest is the presence, in certain sections, of informal communities of users who appear to have developed a strong sense of belonging to the spaces adjacent to the walls: joggers who regularly gather under a particular arch, children who consistently play on a certain lawn, elderly people who meet every afternoon on a bench in front of a section of the curtain wall. These communities of practice, often invisible to planners and administrators, represent the deepest connective tissue between heritage and everyday urban life: this recurrence suggests that the walls may have already generated, spontaneously and in the absence of any formal intervention, processes of collective appropriation potentially conducive to identity and a sense of community. Recognising, supporting and enhancing these informal practices therefore constitutes one of the most significant (and most promising) challenges for any strategy to regenerate the wall system.

The identification of informal communities of users, their sense of belonging and the associated identity-building processes should therefore be understood as an interpretive reading grounded in repeated observation, rather than as findings verified through resident testimony. Triangulating the observational findings with qualitative interviews and/or user surveys represents an important direction for future research and would allow the hypotheses on identity formation and social appropriation advanced here to be tested more robustly.

4. Discussion

4.1. Interpretation of the results: regeneration strategies

The results of the case study carried out on Rome walls enable us to identify three general strategies (which are complementary and not mutually exclusive) for the regeneration of linear heritage: these operate on different scales and with different tools, but all contribute to the same aim of transforming the walls from residual infrastructure into a system of public spaces that define a sense of identity. Their effectiveness is, however, conditioned in each case by specific contextual factors – the quality of the surrounding urban fabric, the availability of management resources, the degree of local community involvement – which determine their applicability and sustainability over time (Table 3). It should be stressed that these contextual factors are treated here as conditions associated with differential effectiveness, as observed within a single, non-experimental case study; the qualitative design of the research allows such associations to be identified and interpreted, but does not permit the demonstration of causal mechanisms in a statistical sense. Where a causal link is proposed in what follows, it is offered as an interpretive hypothesis to be tested through further comparative research, rather than as an established causal relationship.

Table 3. Strategies for the regeneration (physical accessibility, integration into the landscape and cultural programming) and their respective objectives, tools, case studies and implementation challenges (compiled by the authors)

Strategy	Main Objective	Tools and Actions	Exemplary Case	Key Challenges
Physical Accessibility	<i>Ensure continuous walkability of the wall system as a unified itinerary</i>	<i>Pedestrian and cycling paths; lighting; signage; traffic calming</i>	<i>Ostiense-Aventino stretch (Lungotevere — Porta San Paolo)</i>	<i>Discontinuities caused by road traffic; fragmented governance among institutions</i>
Landscape Integration	<i>Connect the built heritage with the urban public green network</i>	<i>Linear parks; equipped green spaces; shared management with local communities</i>	<i>Parco delle Mura Gianicolensi</i>	<i>High maintenance costs; risk of degradation due to lack of stable resources</i>
Cultural Programming	<i>Build a shared cultural identity and animate the wall spaces over time</i>	<i>Events, installations, temporary uses compatible with conservation</i>	<i>Estate Romana (concerts, screenings, performances along the walls)</i>	<i>Seasonality of interventions; difficulty in building continuous year-round programming</i>

The first strategy concerns physical accessibility and the uninterrupted connectivity of the entire wall system. The construction of a network of footpaths and cycle paths capable of overcoming physical discontinuities and gaps in connectivity represents the most urgent priority from a structural perspective, with a dual purpose: functional, by improving soft mobility in dense urban areas; and experiential, by allowing the walls to be enjoyed as a unified route and enabling visitors to appreciate their richness and variety across the different contexts they pass through. The Ostiense-Aventino section of the Aurelian Walls offers a successful example of this strategy: the pedestrian route running alongside the walls from the Lungotevere to Porta San Paolo has been upgraded with improvements to the road surface, night-time lighting, signage and street furniture, creating a continuous and safe route used daily by residents and tourists; integration with the Piramide-Ostiense underground station also ensures accessibility from other parts of the city. However, the problem of discontinuities caused by road traffic remains unresolved; at various points, roads cut across the wall route, creating dangerous crossings, the solution to which requires traffic calming measures and, in some cases, a more fundamental reorganisation of the local road network. This pattern suggests, more specifically, that continuity of the physical route functions as a precondition for the other two strategies discussed below to succeed: without a minimum threshold of walkable continuity, neither landscape integration nor cultural programming appear able to generate regular, non-episodic use, an interpretive link that future research should test explicitly rather than assume.

The second strategy involves integrating the wall system into the landscape through the creation of linear parks that link the built heritage with the network of public green spaces, transforming the adjacent areas into a series of landscaped green spaces. The Gianicolensi Walls Park serves as a prime example of this strategy: stretching along the route of the 17th-19th century papal walls, it offers a varied sequence of spaces of different qualities and characters – formal sections with tree-lined avenues and flowerbeds alternate with more natural areas featuring wild vegetation and open views of the city – and is now one of Rome's most popular urban parks, with a daily presence of residents who have made it an extension of their own domestic space. This strategy, however, presents significant management challenges: maintaining the quality of the green spaces requires continuous and substantial financial resources, which local authorities often struggle to guarantee on a stable basis, with the risk that ambitious projects will gradually deteriorate due to a lack of routine maintenance.

Management sustainability must therefore be considered a design constraint from the very outset, guiding decisions towards low-maintenance solutions and forms of management shared with local communities. The Gianicolensi case indicates that where dedicated management resources are lacking from the outset, the initial quality of design does not appear sufficient on its own to guarantee durable public use, an association that, again, should be read as a pattern to be verified rather than as a proven causal relationship within the scope of this study.

The third strategy concerns cultural planning and temporary activation of spaces through events, art installations and programmes of use that are compatible with heritage conservation. Unlike the previous strategies, this one does not require large-scale permanent physical interventions but has a significant impact on revitalisation of spaces, public visibility of heritage and redevelopment of a shared cultural identity sense (Connolly, 2015). The 'Estate Romana' programme has repeatedly used the city walls as a backdrop for various types of events (concerts, theatre performances, film screenings) with positive results in terms of attendance and the collective perception of the heritage. The main challenge, however, lies in overcoming the seasonal nature of these initiatives by establishing a continuous and diverse programme capable of generating regular use throughout the year, transforming the exceptional event into an ordinary practice of heritage enjoyment. This suggests that the perceived value of city walls as public space is not solely a function of their physical or landscape qualities, but also of the intensity and continuity of programmed activity though, again, isolating an independent effect of programming from that of accessibility and landscape quality would require a research design capable of disentangling these variables individually, which lies beyond the scope of the present study.

4.2. The case of Rome: theoretical validation and empirical specificities

The findings of the case study on Rome confirm and expand upon certain key insights that have emerged from the literature on heritage-led regeneration. The data collected on regeneration practices relating to the Walls and their urban context are consistent with the approach outlined in the Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape – HUL (UNESCO, 2011), which conceives of urban heritage as a layer of meanings accumulated over time and interwoven with the cultural practices of the communities that inhabit and transform the urban space. The typological analysis and the patterns of use documented in section 3 show that the walls function, in several of the contexts examined, as a structure that connects rather than separates different eras, neighbourhoods and practices of use, an indication compatible with Choay's (1992) reading of heritage as a living sediment of urban history. However, this evidence remains illustrative: a genuinely critical test of the HUL approach would require assessing whether the layering of meanings it describes is also perceived and valued as such by residents themselves, rather than inferred by the researchers from spatial and functional analysis alone, an assessment that this study, lacking a dedicated perceptual survey (see § 4.3), is not in a position to provide.

The analysis highlights the conceptual and theoretical shift from the enhancement of individual monuments to linear heritage, understood as a continuous sequence. This aspect requires a systemic approach and the planning of interventions that take account of the relationships between its parts and the potential for connectivity along the entire length of the wall (Tiesdell et al., 1996; Madanipour, 2010; Do, Fassari, et al., 2025), thereby fostering processes that reinforce physical and functional continuity to create high-quality public spaces.

A comparison with similar international cases of linear heritage enhancement supports this argument. The case of the walls of Lucca currently represents the finest Italian example of a modern fortification that is fully preserved and freely accessible, frequented daily by residents and tourists for walks, physical activity and cultural events of international appeal. The walls of Lucca benefit from a long-established management model coordinated directly by the local council, unlike the Roman system, where the walls fall within the jurisdiction of multiple authorities (see § 4.4). The case of York's city walls confirms

that the enhancement of linear heritage requires a city-wide strategy and a systemic vision, rather than a series of isolated interventions, and must be managed in a similar manner by a single conservation body with a uniform system of public access, without any discontinuity in ownership. These comparisons suggest that institutional and managerial simplicity, rather than the value of the heritage or the quality of the landscape itself, may constitute a key differentiating factor between the more comprehensive enhancement seen in Lucca and York and the more fragmented situation in Rome. The comparison, however, remains largely qualitative and based on secondary sources rather than on a common, structured set of indicators applied consistently: it will need to be developed in future phases of the research by defining a cross-sectional analysis that systematically links the Roman case to the international framework.

The importance of daily use emerges clearly from international comparisons as a key factor distinguishing successful regeneration projects from disappointing ones. Gehl (2010) has shown that the quality of public space depends first and foremost on its ability to meet the everyday needs of residents (strolling, sport, play, socialising) rather than on its appeal to tourists or its monumental significance. This resident-centred framework, however, is not uncontested: other scholars have argued that an exclusive focus on everyday, informal use can underestimate the economic and symbolic value generated by tourism-oriented and monumental uses of heritage (du Cros, McKercher, Ee Ong, 2026), and can obscure how access to 'everyday' quality public space is often unevenly distributed across neighbourhoods with different socio-economic profiles a concern this study, based on qualitative observation rather than a social survey (see § 4.3), is not able to fully address. This lesson is clearly borne out in the case of Rome: the sections of the walls most frequented and most appreciated by the local population are invariably those that integrate best with the daily life of the neighbourhood (due to the quality of the routes, the presence of greenery, and perceived safety) and not necessarily those of the greatest architectural or historical value. Within the limits of this study's qualitative and observational scope, daily use by residents appears as an important indicator of the success of heritage enhancement, consistent with Gehl's framework, and as a condition that helps make walled heritage a resource for the everyday city rather than solely a backdrop for tourism though the other value dimensions of heritage enhancement discussed above cannot be dismissed on this basis alone (Pulles et al. 2023).

Positioned within the broader Mediterranean urban context, in which several historic cities are structured around comparable systems of city walls the Roman case shares with these cities a set of recurring challenges: strong seasonal tourism pressure that can crowd out everyday resident use of heritage space; exposure to a hot-summer climate that shapes patterns of use and requires shade and vegetation as design priorities; and, in several cases, overlapping religious, state and municipal authorities with joint or contested responsibility over heritage assets, a condition Rome shares, in relation to the Leonine Walls, with the Vatican City State (see § 4.4). Read in this light, the Roman experience may offer transferable lessons not only to European walled cities in general, but more specifically to Mediterranean cities confronting similar combinations of climatic, touristic and jurisdictional pressures, a dimension that future comparative research could usefully develop.

4.3. Methodological contribution and limits of the research

The research's points of strength reside primarily in the exceptional nature of the case study: the Roman wall system offers an almost complete range of contextual situations – from full integration to the most advanced state of decay – and a historical and stratigraphic depth unrivalled in Europe, making it a privileged laboratory for reflection on linear urban heritage. The typological classification into four contexts (barrier, isolation, integration, appropriation) allows the wall system to be interpreted not as a uniform and undifferentiated whole, but as an articulated sequence of specific situations requiring differentiated design and management approaches. Its methodological contribution should, however, be qualified: the typology has so far been developed and applied only within the Roman case, and its

validity, discriminant power and transferability to other linear heritage systems have not yet been tested empirically. Establishing whether the four categories identified here can be applied consistently to other city-wall systems, or whether they require adaptation to different historical, morphological and institutional conditions, remains an open question for future comparative research rather than a result already demonstrated by this study. The limitations of the study must, however, be explicitly acknowledged.

Firstly, the research is based on qualitative methods of analysis: whilst these allow for an in-depth understanding of the phenomena and patterns of use, they do not permit their statistical measurement in terms of economic, social and cultural impacts (Borin, 2025). The difficulty of precisely quantifying the intensity, frequency and variety of the uses observed – in the absence of systematic surveys using counters, questionnaires or structured observation techniques – represents a significant limitation for the purposes of a comparative assessment of the effectiveness of interventions.

Secondly, the specific nature of the Roman context (due to its stratigraphic complexity, the scale of the system and the exceptional quality of the heritage) makes direct comparison with other, smaller-scale European wall systems difficult, limiting the generalisability of the comparative effectiveness of the various enhancement strategies.

Thirdly, the temporal scope of the analysis, which focuses on the present, does not allow for an assessment of the long-term evolution of the effects of the interventions carried out, nor does it enable the measurement of changes in usage patterns induced by the interventions themselves.

Finally, the research does not include a systematic investigation of residents' perceptions, preferences and evaluations, which would have required a specific sociological component (through in-depth interviews, focus groups or structured questionnaires) capable of capturing the viewpoint of the heritage's primary users and integrating external observation with the users' perspective.

4.4. Operational implications and research perspectives

The future implications for further research lie on two distinct yet complementary levels, concerning respectively the operational dimension of managing Rome's walled heritage and the theoretical dimension of research into regeneration guided by linear heritage.

On the operational level, the recurring association observed across the three strategies analysed in § 4.1 – between the availability of stable resources, coordinated institutional responsibility, and the durability of public use – points to the need for a unified strategy for the Roman wall system, supported by appropriate governance and stable, long-term resources; this connection is proposed here as an interpretation grounded in the empirical patterns discussed above, rather than as a self-standing policy prescription. The fragmentation of institutional responsibilities – distributed among the Ministry of Culture through the Superintendencies, the Municipality of Rome, the relevant individual Municipalities and, for the sections of the Leonine Walls, the Vatican City State – and the resulting lack of consistency in the interventions carried out constitute the main structural obstacles to an effective and coherent enhancement of the entire system. The establishment of a programme agreement between the various competent institutional bodies, accompanied by an urban-scale strategic plan, shared quality standards for interventions, and stable, multi-year funding mechanisms, represents the necessary precondition for any systematic enhancement strategy. In this regard, experiences of integrated governance already tested in other Italian and European contexts for the management of complex, multi-jurisdictional heritage can offer useful models and reference tools. These operational indications should nonetheless be read as directions suggested by the empirical patterns identified in this study, to be substantiated through dedicated governance-focused research, rather than as conclusions directly demonstrated by the case-study analysis presented here.

On a theoretical level, the research offers opportunities for further exploration in at least three directions. The first concerns the significance of linear heritage in sustainable urban regeneration processes and the identification of indicators capable of evaluating social, cultural and economic impacts of enhancement initiatives, thereby filling a significant methodological gap in the literature (Torrieri, Oppio, Rossitti, 2021). The second concerns the development of integrated governance frameworks for the management of complex heritage assets spanning multiple administrative jurisdictions, an issue that the Roman case highlights with particular urgency but which is of general relevance to many European walled city systems. The third direction, perhaps the most promising, concerns the participatory dimension: future research should analyse the ways in which local communities can be involved not only as end-users but as active co-producers of heritage enhancement, in line with Harvey's (2008) insights on the "right to the city", viewed as the collective right to shape urban space, and Sennett's (2018) considerations on the ethics of urban development, understood as an open, negotiated and inclusive process. Concretely, such research could examine instruments already tested in other heritage and public space contexts, such as community stewardship or 'adoption' agreements for the maintenance of specific sections, participatory budgeting processes applied to green-space and public-art programming, co-design workshops preceding intervention in the most contested contexts (those classified in this study as 'barrier' or 'isolation'), and structured neighbourhood committees with a formal advisory role in the ordinary management of the Estate Romana-type cultural programme described in § 4.1. It should be emphasized, however, that there is a practical difficulty in reconciling participatory ambitions with the conservation constraints inherent to protected heritage sites, as well as with the asymmetries in terms of time, expertise, and organizational capacity between institutions and community groups, which may limit participation to a consultative process rather than a genuinely co-produced one. Whether and how the Roman walls system can foster forms of participation that avoid this risk is a question that this study can raise but not answer, given its predominantly observational approach (see § 4.3).

5. Conclusions

The results of the research confirm that cultural heritage can take on new meanings and new functions for the contemporary city whilst retaining its historical identity. Rome's walls do not need to be radically transformed to become high-quality public spaces: their evocative power, imposing physicality and ability to connect different eras of urban history are extraordinary resources waiting to be freed from the conditions of marginalisation and neglect in which they are all too often found. The analysis has highlighted a situation of great potential but one in which development remains patchy and uneven. The Roman wall system possesses exceptional characteristics (physical continuity, architectural quality, the variety of urban contexts it traverses, and the depth of its historical stratification) which make it one of Europe's most significant linear heritage sites. However, the fragmentation of governance, the inconsistency of the interventions carried out and the lack of a unified systemic vision have produced a situation in which instances of excellence alternate with stretches of decay or neglect, compromising the legibility and usability of the system as a whole.

A methodological framework based on five operational principles constitutes the main theoretical proposal derived from the analysis (Figure 4). The first principle is that of an integrated reading of the wall system as a continuous linear infrastructure: before intervening on individual sections or nodes, it is necessary to understand the system in its entirety, its spatial distribution within the urban fabric, its relationships with the road network and green spaces, and its discontinuities and potential for connection.

The second principle is that of diversifying approaches according to context: there is no single optimal solution, but rather a range of design and management responses to be tailored to the physical and social characteristics of each section. The proposed typological classification (barrier, isolation, integration, appropriation) constitutes a useful operational tool for guiding design and management

choices in relation to the specific characteristics of each section, avoiding the mechanical application of standardised solutions to situations that require differentiated responses.

The third principle is that of prioritising everyday use over exceptional tourist use: a heritage site enhanced for residents automatically becomes more attractive to visitors as well.

The fourth principle is that of management sustainability as a design constraint: any intervention must be conceived with a view to its long-term manageability, favouring simple, robust and low-maintenance solutions.

The fifth principle is that of integrated governance and community participation as enabling conditions: even the best physical design will not produce the expected results unless it is supported by adequate governance and a participatory process involving local communities. Observation of spontaneous usage patterns has revealed the walls' capacity to generate collective appropriation even in the absence of formal interventions, indicating that the potential of the wall heritage as a generator of urban life is real and widespread, but needs to be supported by appropriate physical and management conditions.



Figure 4. The five operational principles: (1) integrated analysis, (2) contextual diversification, (3) prioritising everyday use, (4) management sustainability, and (5) governance and participation (compiled by the authors)

The methodological insights drawn from the Roman case are applicable, with the necessary adaptations, to other urban contexts featuring similar linear historical heritage. Future research should include: structured comparative analyses of historic wall systems in different European contexts, checking the transferability of the proposed framework; quantitative assessments of the social,

economic and cultural impacts of the enhancement interventions carried out, using established measurement methodologies (Habitat III, 2016); longitudinal studies on the evolution of usage practices and communities of appropriation in relation to enhancement interventions; experiments with models of participatory governance applied to the management of linear heritage, with the active participation of local communities in the redevelopment of these spaces. The challenge of enhancing historic walls is not merely technical or design-related, but cultural and political: it requires a long-term vision, a capacity for integrated governance among different institutional actors and, above all, the will to place heritage at the service of people's lives and the construction of a city that is fairer, more beautiful and more aware of its own history.

Acknowledgements

A preliminary version of this paper was presented at 8th International Conference on Contemporary Affairs in Architecture and Urbanism in the form of an oral presentation.

Ethics statements

Studies involving animal subjects: No animal studies are presented in this manuscript.

Studies involving human subjects: No human studies are presented in this manuscript.

Inclusion of identifiable human data: No potentially identifiable human images or data is presented in this study.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Contribution to the Field statement

This contribution is situated within the debate on heritage-led urban regeneration, offering advances on three levels. On a theoretical level, it proposes a systemic interpretation of linear cultural heritage that moves beyond the prevailing sectoral approach, shifting the perspective from a constraint to a strategic resource for the contemporary city. Methodologically, through the analysis of the Roman case study, five principles (systemic interpretation, context-sensitive diversification, priority of use, managerial sustainability, and participatory governance) translated into analytical terms, thereby establishing a heuristic framework for future comparative research. Empirically, the observed phenomena can be interpreted as indicators of the identity-forming potential of linear heritage for the regeneration of marginalized areas.

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