Cultural and creative actors in non-urban areas: enacting local stewardship as a regenerative approach

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Cultural and creative actors in non-urban areas contribute to local regenerative actions through practices of stewardship and place-based creativity. This article focuses on how a key principle of regenerative development, "stewardship of the resources of place, identity, and unique potential," is conceived and enacted. The study aims to deepen understanding of how regenerative forms of local development that nurture social, cultural, and ecological vitality can emerge from grassroots initiatives. Drawing on 12 case studies from six European countries within the Horizon Europe IN SITU project, the analysis employs a comparative qualitative approach informed by reflexive monitoring reports. Research findings confirm that cultural and creative actors operationalize regenerative micro-processes by engaging simultaneously in heritage stewardship, encouraging place-inspired creative work, building the capacity of locally-based creators, reinforcing connections to place through a local socioeconomic focus, and using and improving public space. The analysis reveals a dynamic understanding of heritage as a living resource that is actively re-contextualized to drive new social and economic aspirations. Furthermore, creative processes and outputs are anchored in local identity yet generate transferable knowledge and methodologies. The actors' intentions and dedication to creatively address key local issues through their projects demonstrates the potential of cultural and creative actors to contribute as drivers of local change and transition in meaningful ways. This potential is challenged, however, by precarious situations in which the pragmatic sustainability of livelihoods and the fragility of initiatives are common concerns.

KEYWORDS

cultural and creative actors, stewardship, regenerative approaches, rural, socioeconomic development

1 Introduction

In comparison with major urban centres, smaller scale settlements in non-urban areas—small cities, towns and villages, rural regions, and remote areas—are popularly seen as closer to nature and amenable to developing more sustainable lifestyles and experiments in living. Cultural and creative actors living and working in non-urban areas often echo this refrain. For example, in recent research conducted by the European Network of Cultural Centres (Ranczakowska et al., 2024), creative practitioners operating sociocultural centres in non-urban areas mentioned goals such as acting as experimental playgrounds for new sustainable practices, preserving and adapting local traditions to contemporary challenges,

and strengthening community resilience through cultural and ecological initiatives. Their close ties to place, flexible operating structures, and community trust make them particularly agile in testing and adopting lifestyle changes that link culture, sustainability, and local economic vitality. Accompanying these intentions, however, are the pragmatic challenges of sustaining creative initiatives, actions, and organizational structures. Research conducted within the IN SITU project has revealed that while cultural actors located in non-urban areas appear to be well placed to contribute to local socioeconomic development and to inspire and lead local transitions, their operations are often fragile and encounter a variety of challenges.

Internationally, a wide array of research recognizes the potential of cultural and creative actors to support rural revitalization and local socioeconomic development (Campbell and MacLaren, 2021; Liao et al., 2024), often in the context of tourism (Qu and Funck, 2021; Qu and Zollet, 2024; Scherf, 2021, 2023), but studies rarely focus on how culture-based activities intersect with broader regenerative development processes (Duxbury et al., 2025b). Conceptually, the role of culture within regenerative thinking is tied to local identity and endogenous knowledge and practices (Bellato et al., 2023a), but this is underexamined compared to other domains in regenerative development research. Furthermore, concepts of stewardship (within and outside this context) are fractured and focus primarily on environmental aspects, with multiple definitions and perspectives (Golden et al., 2025; Gottwald and Stedman, 2020). This article examines stewardship from a cultural perspective, addressing the gaps in this literature by focusing on how the regenerative principle of place-based stewardship is interpreted and operationalized within the everyday practices of cultural actors, offering empirical insights into an under-researched dimension of regenerative development.

This article examines the goals and actions of 12 cultural and creative actors—the case studies within the IN SITU project—who are taking actions within place-based development contexts, aiming to transform their locales in different ways. Within the context of regenerative development and the stewardship of local resources, the article focuses on the question: How is a key principle of regenerative development, "stewardship of the resources of place, identity, and unique potential," conceived and operationalized within the place-based actions of these cultural and creative actors within the case study projects? The analysis is based on a transversal analysis of creative practitioners' self-reported project goals and their reflexive monitoring reports about the projects' development journeys. This research helps to bring clarity and depth to how cultural and creative actors may take up key roles in driving local transitions in non-urban contexts. It also aims to highlight culture within place-based regenerative actions and contribute to addressing an under-researched area in the literature—cultural and creative actors in smaller communities.

The article begins with an introduction to the IN SITU project and a brief overview of its 12 case studies. To provide conceptual contextualizations, syntheses of recent literature on regenerative development, stewardship, and the roles of cultural and creative actors in non-urban communities in transition are presented in the following sections. Then, the methodology, research findings, and analytic reflections are presented. In closing, we consider the vulnerability of cultural and creative actors in non-urban areas and the need for stabilizing their pragmatic ability to lead place-based transitions in a sustained manner.

2 The IN SITU project

The research for this article was conducted within the context of the IN SITU project, "Place-based Innovation of Cultural and Creative Industries in Non-urban Areas," funded by Horizon Europe (GA no. 101061747). The IN SITU project combines research and experimental actions to better understand the forms, processes, and governance needs of cultural and creative actors located in non-urban areas of Europe and to advance the ability of non-urban cultural and creative sector actors to act as drivers of innovation, competitiveness, and sustainability for the locales in which they are located. The project's scope includes cultural and creative industry enterprises, the arts, and heritage-related initiatives, which together form cultural and creative ecosystems within and across territories. Non-urban areas incorporate rural and remote locations as well as towns, villages, and small cities that may serve as regional hubs for broader territories.

A defining aspect of IN SITU is the interlinking of research and practice through place-based IN SITU Labs—hubs for networking, training and capacity building, and monitoring case studies in six non-urban regions across Europe, located in Portugal, Ireland, Iceland, Finland, Latvia, and Croatia.[1] Within each of these Lab areas, a three-step participatory process involving a plurality of stakeholders was conducted, leading to the identification of 12 case studies overall[2] (two from each Lab location, Figure 1). This process consisted of three temporally-phased activities (Fraioli, 2023): (1) *Community mobilization* (February–April 2023), involving the organization of Speak Out sessions in each Lab location, a series of public forums inviting citizens to present key development and resource issues in their local contexts; (2) *Ecosystem activation* (February–June 2023), in which Horizontal Networks were established in each Lab location, intended as hubs for collaborative learning and jointly discussing and exploring place-based development approaches, which were consulted in the selection of the case studies; and (3) *Mapping and evaluation* (May–June 2023), involving a survey of local cultural and creative agents and organizations, aiming at mapping, evaluating, and identifying the two most relevant, impactful, and innovative projects in each Lab location.

These case studies involve cultural and creative actors responding to place-based issues through community-engaged creative practices. As Fraioli (2023) explains, the case studies play a central role within the IN SITU project as they aim to demonstrate the innovative and transformative role of cultural and creative organizations and professionals in responding to key cross-cutting local issues in their regular work and/or specific projects. The selected case studies are being monitored over 2 years (2024–2025) within the IN SITU project through collaborative and reflexive approaches.

1　For more information on each of the six IN SITU Lab locations, see: https://insituculture.eu/in-situ-labs/.

2　For brief descriptions of each IN SITU case study, see: https://insituculture.eu/case-study-projects/.

FIGURE 1
The 12 IN SITU case studies. Source: IN SITU elaboration.

3 Contextualizing local actions

3.1 From sustainable to regenerative development

The concept of *sustainability* has been subject to criticisms of impact as well as, more broadly, its embedded conceptual framework. For instance, Du Plessis (2012) argues that "dominant sustainability paradigms are reaching the limitations of their usefulness due to their conceptual foundation in an inappropriate mechanistic worldview and their tacit support of a modernization project preventing effective engagement with a complex, dynamic and living world" (p. 7). Other critiques are situated in response to limitations of sustainability paradigms that fall short in driving systemic transformation (Unmüßig et al., 2012) and ensuring long-term resilience (Corvellec et al., 2022), while also acknowledging the fundamental interconnectedness of sustainability dimensions that a technical-economic focus often neglects.

In its place, research and writings on regenerative development have been seeking and evolving alternative pathways to deal with growing environmental issues and legacy systems that are deemed inadequate to address them. Sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic, discourses involving regenerative development have intensified in recent years, unfolding in different contexts. New positions leading towards "regenerative" thinking and acting have emerged, "premised on recovery, resilience and rebuilding, with many questioning existing paradigms and development trajectories" (Bellato et al., 2023b, p. 2, citing Gibson, 2021; Sheller, 2021). Beyond maintaining the status quo, the goal is to restore and

actively revitalize and enhance the capacity of natural and social systems, "enabling systemic transformation and renewal" for long-term resilience (Čegar et al., 2024, p. 2) and "build[ing] the capacity of humans to align and co-evolve with life's systems" (Bellato and Pollock, 2023, p. 3, citing Mang and Reed, 2019; see also Duxbury et al., 2024).

This rise of "regenerative" thinking presents a paradigm that promises holistic and integrated development, encompassing the multiple intertwined domains of lived reality. The regeneration of living systems is envisioned as occurring "mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually, culturally, socially, environmentally, and economically" (Bellato et al., 2022, p. 1042). Stakeholders in such a living system "take on transformational roles that contribute to the regeneration of themselves, places and communities" (p. 1037). Shared purpose and collaborative participation are integral to these processes (Duxbury et al., 2025a, 2025b).

Regeneration is also envisioned as comprising place-based processes that "reflect, honour and enhance their unique social-ecological systems" (Bellato et al., 2022, p. 1037), rooted in deep understandings of their unique histories and characteristics (Sanford et al., 2019) and the ways in which they are constantly evolving (Massey, 2005). Regenerative design and development approaches thus draw from "the unique potential of place and its communities" to develop human capacities to "align with and contribute to the overall health and wellbeing of [these] places and communities" (Bellato and Pollock, 2023, pp. 4–5). This sits well with calls for more holistic and long-term approaches to development that explicitly aim to provide value and well-being to the local community, nurture and support cultural vitality, and encourage care and stewardship of place (e.g.,

Duxbury, 2020; Scherf, 2023; Baltà Portolés, 2023; Qu and Zollet, 2024).

However, perspectives on regenerative development are fragmented and "clarity and consensus regarding its meaning and application remain elusive" (Bellato and Pollock, 2023, p. 2). Within a rapidly emerging pool of literature related to regenerative tourism that has appeared in recent years, two frameworks of principles have been developed by Bellato et al. (2023a) and The Tourism CoLab,[3] which promise to provide some guidance to these diverse efforts. Across these two frameworks, a common dimension that resonates closely with a regenerative approach relevant to cultural and creative practices is *stewardship of the resources of place, identity, and unique potential* (Duxbury et al., 2025b). More explicitly fostering a perspective of place-based cultural stewardship and place-keeping, as Järvelä (2023) argues, could contribute to processes of real transformations through building social resilience and adaptive capacity at the local level.

3.2 Stewardship

While not common within cultural policy discourse, the concept of *stewardship* becomes salient when examining place-based, embedded actions of cultural actors, especially in a context of transition. In literature, stewardship has been interpreted in a variety of ways, often linked to heritage. For instance, stewardship has been used to discuss strategic approaches to safeguarding and preserving heritage collections (e.g., Merrill, 2003), intangible aspects of cultural heritage (Fleming, 2018), and public media's attentiveness to local cultural diversity (Curtin, 2015). An anchor moment of concern regarding cultural heritage stewardship was the destruction of physical cultural heritage during WW2, more recently re-contextualized by a nexus of threats from climate change, armed conflicts, the migration of displaced people, and population decline and ageing in many rural communities. Some contexts in which the term *cultural stewardship* is used refer to less dynamic community situations, although all are vulnerable to the attrition of cultural vibrancy, memory, and sustainability over time.

The concept of *stewardship* tends to emphasize the individuals engaged in conservation initiatives, and, in cultural heritage sites and places, responsibility and care to safeguard cultural heritage from (further) damage (Rezapouraghdam et al., 2024). Gottwald and Stedman (2020) found the most effective determinants of *environmental* stewardship are people-place relationships. From this perspective, the particular location and context for stewardship actions can influence people's roles and responsibilities. Stewardship can provide a collective basis for rationales and mobilized uses/actions.

Beyond preservation of the past for the future, contemporary cultural stewardship approaches tend to also embrace the tensions associated with the continual dynamism of cultural change, evolution, and entanglement with active society. For example, Adejumo (2024) discusses how indigenous Yoruba artists act as stewards of their cultural heritage through creating "evocative objects that members of their communities have found reassuring in their collective

sociocultural practices and worldview" (p. 16). He notes how the art works of the artist Dada Areogun aim to portray the Yoruba worldview, collective experiences and everyday life practices, and the aspirations of members of his Osi-Ilorin community for the purposes of "social reflection, accountability, and action" (p. 17). The agency of this art work is as a medium for "promoting social awareness, cohesion, and advancement" (p. 27).

Local cultural vitality and sustainability have also been linked to collective narrative stewardship. Groth (2019) defines *narrative stewardship* as a practice embedded in everyday life through which people take care of communal resources—from environmental resources such as a river, to tradition and the community itself—through sharing stories. Narrative stewardship is viewed as a collective responsibility, with the "narratives and the knowledge they embed, like packets of digital information dispersed and recombined, are distributed among the individual members of the community" (Walker, 2021, p. 231). Altogether, these narrative practices help to sustain the local culture and community. They contain the "invisible and deeply embedded meanings of [a] place and its traditions" (p. 231), forming a social infrastructure, a collective memory and expression of continuity, "the community's materialization of the sense of place and care for its traditions and the environment" (p. 231).

The intertwining of cultural and environmental stewardship is especially evident in indigenous stewardship perspectives and initiatives. Winters (2023) draws from the Māori spiritual concept of *kaitiakitanga,* which refers to guardianship, protection, and a responsibility to nurture, conserve, and carry forward, to note how stewardship is connected to "scales of time and connotes the care of something that exists for the benefit of others" (p. 153). Indigenous stewardship often takes "a biocultural approach to conservation by prioritizing both biological and cultural diversity, values and needs" (Nielsen, 2024, p. 124, citing Gavin et al., 2015; Sterling et al., 2017). Biocultural resource stewardship integrates "intergenerational place- and value-based knowledge, together with Indigenous practices and beliefs characterized by a strong sense of responsibility towards the local environment" (p. 124). Connection to place and responsibility for resource stewardship "provide a foundation for the continuance and resilience of traditional practices and the knowledge and beliefs that underlie the practices" (p. 12, citing Johnson et al., 2021; Throsby and Petetskaya, 2016).

Bringing these different perspectives together, the general concept of stewardship—and cultural stewardship more specifically—speaks to care for and safeguarding of cultural heritage, and both individual and shared responsibility, accentuated and propelled by people-place relationships for particular sites and locales. It embraces tensions associated with the continual dynamism of cultural change and evolution in an active society, while being sensitive to providing touchstones for reassurance, social awareness and reflection, community cohesion, and collective advancement. Physical art works, collective rituals, or intangible narratives can play important roles. Stewardship is embedded in everyday life and infused with local knowledge, embodying collective responsibility and care for local communal resources and the embedded meanings of a place. Stewardship practices can generate social infrastructure, informed by intergenerational place- and value-based knowledge, and provide renewed agency to collective memory, traditions, and an expression of continuity within times of transition. It can enmesh cultural and biological resources, and embrace a biocultural approach that

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3 https://www.thetourismcolab.com.au/.

prioritizes, together, biological and cultural diversity, values, and needs in a holistic manner. A stewardship approach can serve as a pathway that values local specificities and touchstones while guiding communities in transition.

3.3 Roles for cultural and creative actors in non-urban areas

In recent years, active discourses have emerged in the fields of cultural management and cultural policy about how the cultural and creative industries/sectors can contribute to pressing environmental issues as well as how cultural policy can contribute to and potentially drive this transition and associated transformations (Kangas et al., 2024; Duxbury et al., 2017).[4] Although the cultural and creative sectors (CCS) are recognized as complex ecosystems, embedded in wider social and ecological systems (e.g., Cunningham and Potts, 2015; Pratt, 2021; Virani, 2023), many of these discussions tend to address the cultural sector separate from other dimensions of society and nature. Within the context of urgently addressing growing environmental issues and catalyzing adaptation and regeneration processes, there is a pressing need for a transition in how we situate culture (and cultural policy) and for adopting an ecosystemic approach to culture that incorporates its interdependencies with other spheres of life (Baltà Portolés, 2023).

Very recently in cultural policy research, a distinction has been emerging between *regeneration*—often tied to growth-oriented urban renewal with limited social and environmental outcomes—and *regenerative approaches*, which seek to restore and enhance cultural ecosystems together with their social, political, economic, and environmental contexts, enabling net-positive and co-created dynamics (Dâmaso and Rex, 2025). A regenerative cultural policy approach positions cultural actors as long-term caretakers of place and interdependence. In this sense, regenerative cultural policy converges with practices of stewardship, where cultural and creative actors assume responsibility for sustaining the commons, reinforcing community identity, and enabling adaptive transitions.

This builds on an ecosystemic view of CCS that positions cultural and creative actors as enabling infrastructures of everyday life: sustaining cultural value, building skills and capacities, supporting democratic participation, and generating adaptive potential in times of transition. For example, Sacco et al. (2025) demonstrate empirically that cultural and creative sectors act as systematic activators of skills,

problem-solving capacities, and pro-social behaviors. This emphasis on culture as the generator of adaptive capacity resonates with evidence from geography and community studies. Cunningham et al. (2024) found cultural and creative practices can contribute to preparedness, resilience, and adaptive capacity on the ground, providing the imaginative means for communities to anticipate shocks, rehearse responses, and strengthen resilience. In this view, culture is not merely symbolic but a practical resource for preparedness.

Stewardship can be enacted through artistic and cultural practices of place-making and place-keeping. Art can activate a neglected space, transforming it into "a catalyst for civic engagement, education, and reimagining urban futures," fostering a form of collective stewardship and inviting people to take shared responsibility for their cities (Collins, 2025, p. 1). Socio-cultural centres can operate as stewards of place, regenerating the commons that sustain community life and contributing to transitions by taking on a variety of roles[5] (Ranczakowska et al., 2024). Regeneration is a continuous, adaptive, and "self-reflective practice of co-produced forms of … living" (Strohmayer et al., 2022, p. 6) where stewardship emerges not from singular projects but from sustained engagements with local resources, narratives, and identities. This often means the adaptive use of local cultural and natural resources, where creative actors mobilize heritage, landscape, and storytelling as tools of innovation and identity-making. Stewardship is enacted by revitalizing local myths, sustaining community identity, and positioning a place as a cultural frontier (Hildibrandsdóttir, 2025).

4 Methodology

This article examines the self-narratives and actions of the 12 case studies selected within the IN SITU project (see Section 2 in this article) to determine how they relate to operationalizing the local regeneration principle of *stewardship of the resources of place, identity, and unique potential.* The data analyzed consisted of the narratives in the initial project proposals submitted in 2023[6] and self-completed reflexive monitoring reports that were completed in December 2024 within the IN SITU project.

A tailored six-step process was developed to implement the reflexive monitoring method: (1) refinement of project goals, (2) recording of learnings, (3) analysis of learning outcomes, (4) intermediate project report, (5) final project report, and (6) communication of project results and findings. This monitoring process culminates in two reports submitted and delivered by the cultural practitioners at the half-way point of the projects (in December 2024) and at their completion (in December 2025). These reports compile data on the analysis, evolution, and transformative and

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4   In parallel, numerous cultural organizations, enabled by programmes such as Creative Europe, have been designing and implementing a wide range of projects and initiatives specifically focused on the roles of cultural actors in transitions. For example, COAL's project, "Transformative Territories: Performing Transition through the Arts" (https://www.transformingterritories.com/), acts as a distributed European laboratory uniting a network of actors and artists who are working to promote new ways of inhabiting the Earth. Such projects and initiatives provide necessary spaces for collectively imagining and designing options and trajectories, providing conceptual and imaginative insights, new perspectives, and enabling experimentation that can envision, design, and give shape to new practices, approaches, and ways of living. However, a review of these diverse artistic and creative projects is beyond the scope of this article.

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5   These roles are: Facilitator (Connecting Stakeholders), Educator (fostering learning), Innovator (pioneering new practices), Advocate (championing social, environmental, and economic causes), Cultural Steward (preserving heritage and identity), and Community Builder (creating spaces for engagement).

6   For more information about the case studies, containing data on 40 CCIs and related project ideas that responded to the survey carried out in the IN SITU Labs locations see: https://insituculture.eu/resource/ccis-and-projects-respondents-to-in-situ-survey/.

innovative results of each case study project. They focus on barriers, opportunities, and turning points in the development of the individual projects, and address topics such as revisiting goals, practices/activities and ways of working, people and relationships in the project, project organization, future actions/next steps, and general reflections.

These self-completed reports take the form of a dynamic learning agenda, serving as documentation that compiles data on the analysis, evolution, and transformative and innovative results of each of the case studies in their locale. The report framework uses reflexive monitoring as a conceptual framework, which places emphasis on learning-by-doing, takes context into account, and reflects on the relationships between stakeholders during the process (Arkesteijn et al., 2015; Klassen et al., 2021; Lodder et al., 2020).

This qualitative review and analysis of the reflexive monitoring reports written by the IN SITU case studies was informed by Duxbury et al.'s (2025b) examination of culture-tourism case studies in three small cities in Portugal from a local regeneration perspective, which revealed how the principle of *stewardship of the resources of place, identity, and unique potential* was operationalized by cultural actors who contribute to regenerative micro-processes (urban, social, cultural, environmental, and/or economic) within their broader community. In this previous research, five areas of action stood out as collectively contributing to the revitalization of local resources, place identity, and building potential: heritage stewardship; encouraging place-inspired creative work; building the capacity of locally-based creators; reinforcing connections to place through a local economy focus; and using and improving public space. In the current research, these five categories of areas of action were used as a grid to review the self-reported goals, project development information, and actions of each IN SITU case study from January to December 2024. The use of these categories as a framework to review the goals and actions of the 12 case studies within the IN SITU project serves to test their applicability (and relevance) on a wider scale.

The qualitative data used for this article (deriving from the narratives in the initial case studies project proposals and the reflexive monitoring reports) was examined through thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021) centred on identifying both similar and distinct elements in each case study regarding topics related to *stewardship of the resources of place, identity, and unique potential* in the five areas of action listed above. The analysis was executed in a two-step process: first, close reading and coding of individual cases, and second, cross-case comparative analysis. Initially, each case was reviewed independently through thematic coding to capture unique contextual factors, objectives, and specific practices related to heritage, stewardship, and social outcomes. Specific practices were classified using the five thematic categories and then, within each of these categories, they were grouped into sub-thematic categories that emerged from this analysis (see section 5.6). Overall, this process yielded rich, context-sensitive narratives for each organization.

The subsequent cross-case comparative analysis moved beyond individual context to systematically compare coded segments and organizational narratives based on the five analytical themes (Miles et al., 2014; Yin, 2018). This comparison allowed for the identification of commonalities, significant variations, and emergent typologies regarding how culture is activated as a resource for addressing social challenges. By synthesizing these findings, the analysis generated the central arguments of the article, demonstrating how the five areas of action collectively contribute to the operationalization of place-based stewardship, and

establishing that the case studies use a dynamic and expansive understanding of heritage as a living resource to drive regenerative micro-processes in non-urban contexts.

Table 1 serves as a structured synthesis, mapping the primary activities and long-term goals of each of the 12 IN SITU case study projects (Column 1) against the five regenerative micro-processes outlined by the framework (Columns 2–6). The resulting matrix allows for a transversal comparison, revealing common strategies and challenges employed by cultural actors in small European cities to operationalize the stewardship of place resources.

5 Findings

This section provides a synthesis of research findings based on the two-step process outlined above: coding and comparative analysis. The results of these processes are presented in two ways: first, the analyses of the key ideas and practices found in each of the five thematic categories and, second, the coding results and a comparative analysis based on the sub-themes identified, which serves to highlight the similarities and differences across the case studies examined.

5.1 Heritage stewardship

The case study organizations demonstrate a dynamic and expansive understanding of heritage, actively operationalizing it as a living resource rather than a static historical asset. Projects do not simply preserve local heritage, but re-contextualize heritage for new social outcomes. In essence, it is about actively caring and nurturing the heritage and its communities to ensure their shared vitality. On the one hand, this includes projects focused on tangible cultural assets and infrastructure, such as the Valmiera county manor network, which centers stewardship on preserving and developing the manor houses through community engagement, advocacy for improved public access, and promoting responsible conservation through planned tourist routes. On the other hand, other projects use intangible heritage (derived from folklore, narratives, language,[7] and other traditions) as a basis for contemporary creation (Yule Lads, Gort Arts), or activate the natural and social landscape as educational content (Transmalhar). LAUX focuses on both natural heritage (plants, garden) and intangible heritage (food, culinary traditions) to converge social and economic factors in an unusual garden environment. For projects in fragmented territories, like the Azorean archipelago (Work in progress), stewardship is defined by the necessity to network and preserve the

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7 The preservation of language is an important part of heritage and identity, and we are also observing how digital platforms can help with translation of local/national languages (Yule Lads). In the Yule Lads project, the information on the monuments for the Yule Lads is only in Icelandic. The creators felt that at this time digital translation technology apps are increasingly common on mobile phones and can be used to help non-Icelandic people translate. Local people thus feel confident that this digital translation technology can be relied upon to make the information accessible, and thus the local knowledge can be expressed in Icelandic.

TABLE 1 Key activities of the IN SITU case studies across five thematic areas of stewardship action.

Project	Heritage stewardship	Place-inspired creative work	Building the capacity of locally-based creators	Reinforcing connections to place through a local economy approach	Using and improving public space
Transmalhar (Azores, Portugal)	Uses heritage as educational content for territorial literacy	Co-creates/tests a non-formal education methodology (artistic practices)	Empowers at-risk youth; offers free access to culture/art	Integrates methodology into a vocational school curriculum (MELT)	Transforms local spaces/heritage into dynamic educational/ social contexts
Work in Progress (Azores, Portugal)	Preserves/highlights artistic creation via docuseries promoting an artist network	"Work in Progress" docuseries featuring local artists across the Azorean islands	Gives visibility and professional platform to local creators	Increases audiences/ sustainability; secures public-private partnerships	Uses different physical locations in the Azores as docuseries settings
Art in Gort (Ireland)	Celebrates local heritage/ stories; incorporates traditional elements (festivities)	Makes the arts visible in Gort; holds workshops on local traditions featuring local artists; focus on place-specific creation and display	Supports artists' rights, fair pay, and professional development	Contributes to town renewal; utilizes local venues and businesses, generating local economic benefit for artists	Activates outdoor and semi-outdoor spaces: public squares, streets, and courtyards
The Voice of Youth (Ireland)	Uses street art (mural) as a platform for youth expression	Creates a place-inspired mural derived from discussions with students about their community	Empowers youth by teaching fundamental art skills in a place with limited creative opportunities	Fosters community pride/ belonging; uses local organizational support from youth group and community members	Uses a "grey wall" at community center for high visibility and public engagement
Yule Lads (Iceland)	Protects/strengthens Yule Lads folklore; connects stories to landscape	Creates a series of 13 Yule Lad monuments; involves a young local artist whose artwork will be incorporated into the designs	Evolved from an individual effort into a community-driven initiative via dialogue with collaborators	Aims to increase tourism with Yule Lads brand to boost sales of local food, services, crafts, and agricultural products	Installation of Yule Lads monuments in locally meaningful places; link via QR codes to local culture, history, services, and attractions
RÝMI – X (Iceland)	Promotes spaces for creative work and conversation; supports local culture and school creativity	Engages in place-inspired creative work (e.g., glacier soundscape workshop)	Empowers participants to pursue ideas; youth-centered focus	Strengthens social innovation via collaboration between individuals, companies, and educational/ cultural institutions	Seeks to create physical spaces for creativity (derived from brainstorming exercises with the community)
Mapsion (Finland)	Uses the significant Vuojoki Mansion as the central venue	A one-day projection mapping festival attracting international artists	Strengthening relationships by visiting other festivals	Main local partnership with the municipality; event generated more dynamism into the local economy	Uses the Vuojoki Mansion for the projection mapping event; revitalization of the autumn season for a small community
Footprint of a Giant (Finland)	Revives the forest, a forgotten culturally significant place, using art	Temporary exhibition using fabrics wrapped around tree trunks, using colours and images, highlighting the hidden story of the place	Driven by focus on creative reflection for new ideas (e.g., progression to ecofeminist reflections)	Aims to make the exhibition more open/accessible by expanding the exhibition area and making wider participation possible	Spreads across a larger (forgotten) area towards the passing road
Valmiera county manor network (Latvia)	Preserves manors; plans a tourist route to highlight cultural heritage values; advocacy for improved public access and responsible conservation	Promotes activities like storytelling seminars and creative idea workshops to generate creative ideas for specific manors, community activities, and incorporating local themes	Holds network meetings to inspire members and provide training	Network meetings are held at different manors; leverages municipal and university cooperation for resources and promotion	Utilizes manor complexes for cultural/ social activities, integrating them into the community's daily life

(Continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Project	Heritage stewardship	Place-inspired creative work	Building the capacity of locally-based creators	Reinforcing connections to place through a local economy approach	Using and improving public space
LAUX (Latvia)	Focuses on natural (garden) and intangible (food) heritage	Thematic monthly events and workshops on site; creation of elevated planting beds following a traditional weaving pattern	Plans to certify the garden as organic, adding credibility and transparency also to LAUX's culinary offerings	Creates a "Members Club" (subscription meals/goodies); participates in markets; tests a financially viable lifestyle brand	Focuses on revitalizing the garden space
Repertoar (Croatia)	Creates a structured digital inventory (database) of local cultural and creative assets	Creates a public database of local culture-based infrastructure, places, venues, regulations, production capabilities, performers, organizations, events and others	Database increases transparency and access for event/activity organizers, supporting creators	Fosters networking and collaboration, increasing the visibility of cultural events, improving communication between organizations, and raising the quality of cultural program quality	Manages/improves the use of public spaces digitally (coordinated access and information surrounding them)
From the gig to the audience (Croatia)	Counters mainstream music to revitalize the local music scene	Provides musical workshops for school-aged children; developed two bands who perform publicly	Musical workshops nurturing a new generation of musicians and music lovers, the future audience and creators of the local cultural scene	Contributes to a sustainable local cultural ecosystem; collaborations with the city, schools, and other local organizations provide performance opportunities	"Public space" not just physical locations: bands' performances increase public interest (young people and their families) in alternative music

Source: Developed by authors.

continuous cultural production of a remote place. The core action of many projects is utilizing cultural capital and heritage to address social challenges, such as engaging youth (The Voice of Youth, From the gig to the audience, RÝMI – X), promoting territorial attraction (Mapsion), or raising the visibility of the local cultural sector (Repertoar).

5.2 Encouraging place-inspired creative work

Creative work is universally anchored to the unique potential of the locality, but, in some cases, the final output often takes the form of replicable methodologies or digital platforms, making the creative process itself scalable. Physical interventions are highly place-specific, such as original and contemporary projection mapping on a local manor house (Mapsion), a community-led mural developed by and reflecting local youth concerns (The Voice of Youth), or the 13 Yule Lads series of narrative monuments and their associated digital layer of the region's cultural legacy and historic information, anchors to develop and co-produce new place-specific cultural products and services with an array of community members (Yule Lads). Some project outputs include digital documentation of the creation process for a new work in each edition (Work in progress docuseries) and the development of creative, non-formal educational methodologies (Transmalhar). Other core creative work involves collective digital inventory systems (Repertoar), serving as a back-end for interconnecting cultural organizers and a front-end public events calendar. Such a platform raises greater awareness of contemporary

cultural production and exhibition in the region—and their producers—and aims to encourage local cultural actors to consolidate energies with collaborative efforts. This hybrid approach with local content delivered through scalable innovation shows how non-urban creativity generates both identity-specific art and transferable knowledge. The place-inspired work realized through these projects employs a diverse range of cultural and creative activities (see Table 2). Education and methodology also play important roles in creative experimentation: for example, the co-creation and testing of non-formal education methodologies that integrate artistic and community practices for territorial literacy (e.g., Transmalhar). Storytelling is transversal to all these activities and resonates with the specificities of each location.

5.3 Building the capacity of locally based creators

Capacity building moves beyond traditional skill-based workshops to focus on collective professionalization, platform creation, and self-awareness. A prominent theme is raising the monetary and self-value of cultural actors, supporting professional identity, as seen in projects advising on appropriate fees for local artists (Gort Art). At the same time, creating and sustaining a professional platform for visibility (Work in progress docuseries, Repertoar digital database) that give artists exposure and networking opportunities is also highlighted. Other projects focus on agency and empowerment, encouraging participants to gain self-knowledge and self-awareness and offer free

TABLE 2 Examples of place-inspired cultural and creative activities of IN SITU case studies.

Cultural-creative category	Examples of activities	Case studies
Arts and crafts	Mural painting and street art	The voice of youth
	Exhibitions using fabrics and visual language in the landscape	Footprint of a giant
	Workshops in traditional crafts like strawboy/girl hats and willow lantern-making	Gort Art
Music and performing arts	Music workshops (guitar, drums, keyboard) and development of bands focused on alternative music genres	From the gig to the audience
	Soundscape workshops that focus on experimentation using local elements	"The Soundscape of Glaciers" organized by RÝMI – X
Media and technology	Projection mapping and light festival	Mapsion
	Creation of a docuseries highlighting Azorean artists in acts of creation	Work in progress
	Digital inventory systems and public events calendars on an integrated platform	Repertoar

Source: Developed by authors.

access to contemporary cultural practices (Transmalhar). For musicians, capacity building means providing workshops and allocating additional rehearsal time and creative space to encourage the development of original music (From the gig to the audience). Additionally, skill development and mentorship, and providing specialized workshops (The Voice of Youth's art skills, RÝMI – X's technical workshops), also contribute to the overall trend of developing the agency of cultural and creative actors and the ecosystem's overall value. A particular mention must be made of the efforts made within many projects to focus on building the creative capacities of children and/or youth as creators in their own right, through enabling access to mentorship and knowledge, skills development, infrastructures, and opportunities to create and perform (Transmalhar, The Voice of Youth, RÝMI – X, From the gig to the audience).

5.4 Reinforcing connections to place through a local economy focus

The projects actively seek to position culture as an engine for local economic and social sustainability, often requiring complex cross-sectoral collaboration. Three main strategies emerged across the case studies:

1. *Cultural branding and place identity development*. Projects use local narratives and site-specific characteristics to shape a differentiated place identity that can support regenerative outcomes and place-based tourism (e.g., Yule Lads; Mapsion).
2. *Collective infrastructures for creative work*. Initiatives build shared conditions for ongoing creative practice, including digital coordination tools that connect cultural actors and streamline event organization (e.g., Repertoar) and physical spaces that sustain production and audience relationships over time (e.g., From the gig to the audience's commitment to supporting bands' long-term ambitions).
3. *Strategic partnership and resource development*. Projects cultivate grants, municipal backing, private-sector partnerships, and collaborations with local venues and businesses to ensure continuity and local relevance (e.g., RÝMI – X; Work in Progress; Gort Art).

The shared aim of these strategies is to contribute to a sustainable cultural and creative ecosystem that diversifies the local economy and brings greater visibility to cultural and creative work in the broader community. Beyond a local economy focus, we notice that some of the projects aim to integrate creative practices and approaches into formal structures of local educational systems. For example, Transmalhar is piloting its methodology within a local vocational school curriculum to assess longer-term impact on student success and community engagement. This suggests that the category's focus on the local economy should be broadened to the socioeconomy, where cultural initiatives support both economic vitality and social well-being.

5.5 Using and improving public space

Public space consists of not just physical locations but also social constructs, defined by how people use, interpret, and interact within them. The projects leverage public space in three critical ways: physical activation, social transformation, and digital organization. *Physical activation* is addressed in some projects by transforming neglected areas into cultural assets, such as painting a mural on a "grey wall" to express the voices of local youth and enhance the community's sense of ownership and pride (The Voice of Youth); creating culture-based public events to activate outdoor and semi-outdoor spaces such as gardens (LAUX), forests (Footprint of a Giant), public squares, streets, courtyards, a former pottery studio, and showrooms (Art in Gort); or addressing issues related to the accessibility of cultural heritage and the importance of preserving historical building structures (Valmiera county manor network). In other projects, while not focused on physical construction or rehabilitation, we observe the use of public space for *social transformation*. Some projects use and transform local spaces including the community itself and its heritage, generating a dynamic educational and social context for at-risk youth (Transmalhar) or open spaces for creativity and community interaction (RÝMI – X). We also observe an evolution of "public space" into the digital realm. With a different lens, other projects develop *digital platforms* to better coordinate and publicize the use of physical spaces, increasing their transparency and access (Repertoar's database of venues and regulations; Yule Lads' QR codes linking monuments to a website), giving visibility to local

TABLE 3 Regenerative micro-processes across 12 case studies by sub-theme of stewardship.

Thematic areas of stewardship	Sub-theme	Project count
Heritage stewardship	Intangible/conceptual focus (folklore, stories, education, music)	8
	Tangible/physical place focus (manors, mansion, forest, garden)	4
Place-inspired creative work	Process/educational/events (workshops, seminars, thematic events)	5
	Physical art/monument/installations (mural, projection mapping, fabrics, monuments)	4
	Digital/documentary/database (docuseries, database, soundscape)	3
Building the capacity of locally-based creators	Skill/empowerment focus (teaching art skills, empowering youth, training members)	6
	Professional/systemic focus (fair pay, rights, vocational curriculum, networks, transparency)	6
Local economy approach	Systemic/ecosystem building (partnerships, social innovation, cultural ecosystem support, vocational integration)	5
	Direct market/tourism/brand (sales, tourism, lifestyle brand)	4
	Conceptual/reflection (digital access/coordination, creative reflection for new ideas)	3
Using and improving public space	Physical location as venue/setting (activating streets, manors, grey walls, gardens, forests)	7
	Conceptual/social transformation (public interest, space creation ideas)	3
	Digital space focus (digital management, increase visibility)	2

Source: Developed by authors.

artists and cultural professionals, and raising awareness about their efforts (e.g., the Work in progress docuseries featuring nine local artists from nine diverse cultural fields promoting the region's artistic output).

5.6 Comparative overview of emergent sub-themes

Contributing to deepening understanding of the regenerative development principle of "stewardship of the resources of place,

identity, and unique potential" and its operationalization, this analysis confirms that cultural and creative actors generate regenerative micro-processes by engaging simultaneously in the five key areas of place-based stewardship: heritage stewardship; encouraging place-inspired creative work; building the capacity of locally-based creators; reinforcing connections to place through a local economy focus; and using and improving public space. To understand the prevalence and nature of these activities, we categorized the primary approach used by each project within each of the five thematic areas, which resulted in sub-thematic areas being identified within them. Table 3 visually

synthesizes these findings, providing a comprehensive overview of the more dominant and less frequent approaches utilized across the 12 case studies.

As seen in Table 3, a key similarity across the case studies is the emphasis on "intangible/conceptual focus in heritage stewardship" (eight projects have this primary focus). This finding suggests that stewardship is often exercised through the revitalization of local stories, music scenes, educational content, and folklore, rather than being restricted to the preservation of physical sites. Equally prominent was an emphasis or focus on particular physical locations, such as streets, historic manors, grey walls, gardens, or forests. These were not "heritage" sites but, instead, were carefully selected public venues or settings that, through the project, would be activated in creative ways (seven projects have this primary focus).

Furthermore, the findings related to "local economy approach" highlight a near-even split among three dimensions, indicating that projects pursue financial sustainability through diverse pathways. While four projects aim for direct market, tourism, or brand revenue (e.g., Yule Lads, LAUX), an even greater number focus on systemic or ecosystem building through collaborations and vocational integration (e.g., Transmalhar, From the gig to the audience). A further three projects focus efforts on reflecting on current practices and conceptualizing new approaches involving, for instance, digital access or coordination to improve collective effectiveness of creative practice (i.e., Repertoar) or new creative directions.

The focus on building capacity of locally based creators is also evenly split between two complementary approaches. First, we observe a focus on skills-based empowerment of individuals, involving the teaching of art skills and other training among local cultural actors as well as a significant focus on empowering youth through skills development and providing mentored opportunities to pursue creative practices. Second, we observe a systemic focus on collective professionalization, which relates to, for example, fair pay, creators' rights, vocational curriculum development, network-building, and transparency of business matters in the creative sector.

6 Discussion and reflections

This study explores how culture-based activities intersect with broader regenerative development processes, aiming to contribute to greater understanding of the role of culture within place-based regenerative development approaches, an under-researched area within regenerative thinking. The research focuses on how the regenerative principle of stewardship is interpreted and operationalized within the everyday practices of cultural actors. By examining how regenerative approaches are operationalized in specific places and contexts, this foregrounds the active processes through which cultures—and communities—are sustained and evolve.

Although the projects examined here were not intentionally created as projects of regenerative development, a key principle, "stewardship of the resources of place, identity, and unique potential," can be observed in the intentions, ideas, and place-based actions of the cultural and creative actors driving the 12 IN SITU case study projects. Regeneration and stewardship are necessarily continuous and adaptive processes (Strohmayer et al., 2022), emerging from sustained engagements with local resources, narratives, and identities.

This study contributes snapshots in time and identifies the types of activities that punctuate and contribute to such ongoing processes. The actors' intentions and dedication to creatively address key local issues through their projects demonstrates the latent agency of the cultural and creative sector to contribute as drivers of local change and transition. The research aligns with contemporary debates that situate the cultural and creative sector as complex, ecosystemic, and embedded within broader socio-ecological systems. Focusing on specific actions of cultural and creative actors in smaller communities across six countries, it reinforces our understanding of the implementation of change-making efforts in driving transition.

Cultural and creative actors in non-urban areas are uniquely positioned and active in operationalizing regenerative micro-processes by simultaneously engaging in the five interconnected areas of action of the stewardship of resources of a place: heritage stewardship, encouraging place-inspired creative work, building the capacity of locally based creators, reinforcing connections to place through a local economy focus (broadened to socioeconomy), and using and improving public space. This integrates a dynamic and expansive understanding of heritage, treating it as a living resource rather than a static historical asset and re-contextualizing it for new social and economic aspirations and outcomes. The creative work produced by these actors is anchored to the unique potential of the locality while also demonstrating scalability and transferable knowledge. They generate identity-specific art through highly place-specific physical interventions, but also produce outputs that take the form of replicable methodologies or digital platforms that can be adopted or adapted elsewhere. However, despite their critical roles in driving local transitions, these cultural and creative actors—and their actions—are often fragile and constrained, which inhibits their sustained capacity of having a key role as designers and drivers of local stewardship and regenerative strategies in non-urban areas.

Furthermore, we observe that cultural actors' relations with and use of public space, often relating to site-specific creation and place-based meanings, may also bring challenges brought forth by external changes of access. During the analysis, we noticed the vulnerability of access to physical venues, exemplified by Mapsion potentially changing its location due to the loss of indoor access to a key heritage building due to privatization. Similarly, From the gig to the audience is constrained by the limited access to suitable venues for workshops and rehearsals. These examples, among others shared with the IN SITU project,[8] highlight that securing and maintaining physical space for implementing this work remains a challenge to cultural stewardship in non-urban areas.

From a theoretical perspective, this article contributes to research literature in two ways. First, the study aims to advance conceptualization and theory about culture in regenerative approaches, informed by emergent but fractured research in various

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literatures, to lead to a more cohesive and connected multidisciplinary approach. Second, this work contributes to advancing thinking about how principles of regenerative approaches can be operationalized. In the diverse regenerative literature, the development of regenerative principles to help organize and guide the rapidly evolving field is a recent development, and comprehensively thinking about the operationalization of these regenerative principles is an advancement in this broader field. This article specifically contributes to understanding the operationalization of the key principle of regenerative thinking, "stewardship of the resources of place, identity, and unique potential," as taken up through the actions of cultural and creative actors in non-urban areas. The study provides a basic understanding of the conceptualization and operationalization of this key principle within the perspectives and actions of the case studies analyzed. In so doing, it deepens understanding of the roles and actions of cultural and creative actors in local regenerative development and local transition.

The study's findings are based on examining 12 case studies geographically situated in non-urban areas across six European countries (Portugal, Ireland, Iceland, Finland, Latvia, and Croatia). This relatively limited scope is a key limitation of this exploratory research. Extending the research into larger urban contexts and in non-European countries would deepen understanding of the roles of cultural actors in localized regenerative processes across diverse contexts. As well, longitudinal experiments that track changes and adjustments over time would deepen our understanding of these regenerative development processes. Furthermore, the emergent frameworks for regenerative cultural practices should be further explored and refined. The domains of stewardship actions could also be examined from a perspective of the competencies required by cultural actors to effectively lead and manage these stewardship actions. At a theoretical level, further conceptual attention is also required to advance understanding of culture within a regenerative thinking framework linked to emerging research on transition[9].

This research also has implications from a practice-based perspective. The cultural and creative actors involved in the case studies examined did not intentionally position their work in the context of stewardship nor regenerative development, but their motivations and actions were intuitively aligned with this general line of thinking. However, if cultural and creative actors were to develop projects with a specific intention to foster cultural (and wider) stewardship of place, informed by the insights and actions identified in this study and enabled by supportive policy frameworks, their planning and actions could be more strategically steered towards specific outcomes needed in particular places and may more effectively resonate with local regenerative development.

7 In closing: confronting challenges inhibiting capacities for action

As the effects of climate change are growing ever more evident, the broader contextualizing societal discourse is evolving, from sustainability,

to regeneration, transition, and sometimes even transformation. The vulnerabilities of immediate conditions and local community action—collective preparation and capabilities to look after all the members of the community and its place—have been a concern for some time now but have heightened in recent years (see, e.g., Mendis et al., 2003; Stringer-Holden, 2025). Although often marginalized, the care and stewardship of local resources includes a cultural dimension, a view of culture as social infrastructure, not as social decoration. In this context, culture is an infrastructure of meaning-making (Kaszyńska, 2025), essential as a driver of long-term civic engagement and community cohesion (Collins, 2025), and a creator of local "spaces of possibilities" that enable transformative experiments in everyday lives, producing collective actions to co-create future trajectories (Kagan, 2023). Through locally embedded projects, cultural and creative actors take on the role of facilitators of "creative change processes" that aim to build more sustainable and livable places in local communities (Asare, 2021, p. 30).

As we found in the current research, cultural and creative actors are poised to play key roles as designers and drivers of local stewardship and transition in meaningful ways. However, cultural and creative actors in non-urban areas are often challenged by precarious situations in which the pragmatic sustainability of livelihoods, typically a portfolio of activities, is an active concern. The fragility of initiatives is often a reality when the critical mass of cultural and creative actors is thin, as it often is in smaller and remote places. Burnout of leaders in the cultural and creative sector has been observed as a regular pattern in many non-urban contexts, when the passion-driven energies put into launching and developing an initiative over many years can no longer be sustained.[10] Placing the responsibility on cultural and creative actors to be a driver of transition for one's community or region is thus both a welcome challenge and a weight for (typically) a few persons to carry things forward, especially if supportive frameworks are not in place.

Regenerative approaches emerge not from singular projects but from sustained engagement. Acts of stewardship can serve as a pathway that values local specificities and touchstones while guiding communities in transition. Stewardship practices can generate social infrastructure and provide renewed agency to collective memories, knowledges, and traditions. In building capacities to enable cultural and creative actors to lead such initiatives, steps must be taken to safeguard the durability of human capacities and energies. More broadly, an ecosystemic perspective on culture and cultural work that recognizes its interdependencies with other spheres of life is necessary to enable more holistic, long-term, and regenerative approaches to local development.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because they are only available for internal use by members of the project Consortium. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to Nancy Duxbury, in-situ@ces.uc.pt.

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9   The extensive research on transition was deemed beyond the scope of this article, but forms an adjacent conceptual field for further investigation.

10   Insight from a regional cultural director speaking to IN SITU consortium members, 2024.

Author contributions

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