

From dark pasts to opera at the Arena: Repurposing heritage at Verona's historic city centre

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The Roman Arena, located south of Verona's UNESCO World Heritage Site for over 2000 years, is a multipurpose venue historically used to host gladiatorial games, public executions, and bullfights among other public spectacles. Therefore, its rich heritage is linked to critical discourse and extensive ethical issues arising from human and animal exploitation, suffering, and death for public entertainment. Having experienced periods of decline due to neglect and natural disasters, it presently stands as one of Verona's most notorious heritage sites, and the largest in scale. Adding to its physical presence, which is naturally connected with the city's urban landscape, it has been effectively repurposed as the venue for the Arena di Verona Opera Summer Festival. Recognised as the world's largest open-air musical event of its kind, the festival attracts between 13000 and 15000 spectators each evening across 45 to 50 performances per season. This conceptual paper examines the case of the Arena and highlights the threefold dimensions of tourism activity it catalyses, which sit across dark, heritage and music tourism. It evaluates this case study of repurposed heritage against the blueprint of the European Commission's framework for cultural heritage, as its significance and current operations are directly linked with social inclusion, sustainability, conservation, innovation and internationalisation of tourist destinations. Adding complexity to the case study, the use of opera for audience development purposes faces challenges related to the genre's perception as elitist and its links with issues such as social exclusion and cultural capital development. In view of the magnitude of the social, economic and environmental pressures and opportunities that the Arena and the Opera Festival generate, the paper discusses their implications through the lenses of dark, heritage and music tourism theoretical frameworks. Finally, it proposes methodological approaches to consolidate a deeper understanding of the repurposing of longstanding dark heritage for culture, music and the festivalisation of World Heritage Sites.