

The Arena di Verona Opera Festival: Lessons on sustainable adaptive reuse of heritage sites for the creative industries

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Current issues and debates around sustainable production and management in the live events sector tend to focus on purpose-built venues that are increasingly designed to incorporate contemporary trends and sustainability approaches across their strategic, managerial and operational dimensions. However, there is a significant gap in research on longstanding heritage infrastructure that presents abundant opportunities for the implementation of adaptive reuse initiatives and transformative repurposing. Substantial research has been conducted on cultural flagships homed at former industrial facilities (Vafaie et al., 2023; Peck, 2020; Misirlisoy and Günçe, 2016), such as the Tate Modern (*a former power station reconverted as an art gallery*) and the Roundhouse (*previously a railway engine transformed into a live performing arts venue*). But the authentic features, challenges and distinctiveness of ancient heritage sites repurposed as venues for live events remain under-researched. This paper addresses this gap by examining the case of the ancient Roman Arena situated in Verona's historic city centre and at the core of a UNESCO-designated heritage site. With nearly 2000 years of longstanding history, the site and its extensive auditorium with a capacity of up to 30,000 spectators have been given numerous uses, including gladiatorial games, animal-based public entertainment, political spectacles, marketplaces and civic endeavours. In the present day, it has been repurposed as the host of the world's largest open-air opera festival, as the Arena di Verona summer opera programme spans approx. 50 evening performances, accommodating up to 15,000 spectators per show with an excess of 400,000 tickets sold and a financial return of over €35.5m in 2025 (Nomisma, 2025). The scope of these operations poses significant sustainability challenges to the long-term preservation and conservation of the archaeological site. But in turn, the repurposing of the heritage venue for the creative industries effectively catalyses an abundant range of positive social and economic impacts. These translate into and facilitate social and economic sustainable development through direct, indirect and induced economic activity and the creation and upholding of jobs. In addition, social regeneration is also catalysed through the celebration and performance of art forms that are inextricably linked to Italian culture, performed by international talent within a typical Italian context that provides a powerful backdrop rooted in its significance as a heritage site. In light of this, the paper discusses the alignment of the Arena di Verona as a repurposed heritage venue for the arts with the European Commission's (2019) framework for action on cultural heritage. This encompasses social inclusion and access, sustainable management of heritage, protection of heritage, knowledge exchange and international cooperation. In addition, the paper also discusses the case of the Arena di Verona against the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its relationship with SDG 8 (work and economic growth), 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure), 10 (reduced inequalities), 11 (sustainable cities and communities) and 12 (responsible consumption and production).