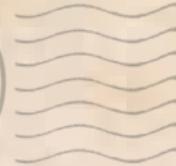# WRENCH

Whispers of Time
Heritage as Narratives of Climate Change

A PEOPLE'S PLAN
FOR TAKING CARE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE
IN TIMES OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Index

OF CLIMATE-CHANGE

WHISPERS OF TIME

HERITAGE AS NARRATIVES

WRENCH

A Belmont Forum project

A Belmont Forum Project

A guide for teachers

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Introduction

1.1 | Presentation of the WRENCH project

WRENCH is an inter-university project based at the Institute of the History of Science at the Autonomous University of Barcelona in Catalonia, Spain.

WRENCH aims to address the effects of climate change on tangible and intangible heritage, while broadening the traditional understanding of heritage to include narratives, stories and ephemeral traces. Even more than through ruin, abandonment or destruction, heritage is lost forever when it becomes mute, unable to tell stories. WRENCH conceives of heritage both as something at risk and as something capable of telling the story of the risk we are all facing.

https://webs.uab.cat/wrench/

1.2 | Why a people's plan?

Climate change is the great challenge we face: it is already having an impact on cultural heritage, both tangible (such as monuments, historic buildings and archives) and intangible (practices, knowledge and traditions).
We need technological solutions to protect material assets and research to preserve intangible ones, but cultural heritage cannot become something only for experts to observe under a glass dome.

Cultural heritage is a living part of the community, a space that creates identity and tells stories about the past, allowing us to imagine the future of a place.

Li-An Lim on Unsplash

The challenge of climate change is one that goes far beyond its effects on heritage and impacts the lives of people, especially those who are most marginalised and vulnerable, and other living beings that inhabit the planet.

Too often, however, the discourse on climate change focuses on two levels: the scale of international agreements between states (the COPs) or the individual scale.

According to this approach, we will be saved either by the world's leaders or by the choices that each individual makes with their wallet.

What is missing, in our opinion, is a reflection on collective action, on community choices, on the needs and practices that emerge from the bottom up.

This is why we believe that we need to start with communities in order to tackle climate change by combining sustainability and social justice.

When it comes to cultural heritage, communities must also be at the forefront of decision-making processes.

If heritage embodies the collective memory of a community, it is crucial that that community has a say in how to mobilise those memories within and against climate change.

The interdisciplinary WRENCH project invites schools, associations, individuals, local institutions and the entire community to participate in a collective process to write many popular plans, in different territorial contexts, on how to tackle climate change, take care of heritage and start from the past to imagine the future.

A popular plan is a document written through a collective process, containing memories, principles and values, knowledge and ideas for transformation in the short, medium and long term. A popular plan is made up of stories and maps, pilot actions, actors and resources to bring them to fruition.
Furthermore, it can become a tool to put on the table of public institutions and ask them to do their part.

SCHOOLS CAN PLAY A KEY ROLE IN THE PROCESS OF BUILDING A PEOPLE'S PLAN: WITH THIS DOCUMENT, WE HOPE YOU WILL WANT TO JOIN WRENCH!

https://ilmanifesto.it/la-febbre-del-litio-corrompe-lafrica

The humanities and the socioecological crisis

2.1 | Introduction

In this first part of the guide, we offer materials, exercises and advice on how to use humanities tools to help students understand climate change and, more generally, the contemporary socio-ecological crisis, linking that crisis to the community's tangible and intangible heritage of memories.

In particular, we will focus on the opportunities offered by storytelling as a tool for engaging students in a co-research project involving their school and community. The assumption is that storytelling is not only a way to communicate but also a way to learn, to do research, to understand the world we live in.

But why do we need the humanities to understand the socio-ecological crisis? What use are literature, history, art and philosophy in the face of melting glaciers, droughts and the mass extinction of so many species?

To begin with, if humans have caused this crisis – and science agrees on this – we need to study humans, their cultures, their history, the way they think and organise themselves.

The humanities can also help us to reflect on what drives major human change.
It will be useful to show our students the power of storytelling, exploring with them all those times when a novel, a public speech, perhaps a film or a song has had a major impact on society.

We need scientific data to understand climate change and monitor the Earth, but graphs will never push people to take action for change.

The New York Public Library on Unsplash

Box 2 | Stories that moved the world (some examples)

In 1852, writer Harriet Beecher Stowe published the novel Uncle Tom's Cabin or Life Among the Lowly, which was instrumental in the fight against slavery.
On 28 August 1963, Martin Luther King delivered his famous speech I Have a Dream (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EF7E--_BdSg).
On 8 June 1972, Nick Ut, a photographer for the Associated Press, published a photograph that would change the perception of the Vietnam War. The photograph became known as "https://www.ilpost.it/2022/06/08/foto-guerra-vietnam-kim-phuc/".
In 1983, the apocalyptic film The Day After was released, warning of the risk of nuclear war and contributing to the movement for nuclear disarmament (in English: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utGRP9Zy1lg; in Italian, you can try to watch it on Prime https://www.primevideo.com).
In 1985, Sun City: Artists United Against Apartheid recorded an album and made a film to mobilise international public opinion against the racist regime in South Africa (https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/sun-city-artists-against-apartheid/).

Aditya on Unsplash

For decades now, scientific research has been developing new disciplines in the humanities, characterised by a focus on environmental issues.

Environmental history, for example, studies the relationship between society and the environment throughout the centuries.

This has meant that instead of studying only kings, leaders, wars and empires, historians have begun to study forests, domestic and wild animals, rivers, but also cities and factories from an environmental perspective. Ecocriticism deals with the analysis of literary and non-literary texts from an environmental perspective. In some cases, the connection is very obvious, think of the works of Leopardi or Calvino, but in other cases, ecocriticism could make us read well-known works with different eyes (what would an ecocritical reading of The Betrothed or The Divine Comedy be like?). The list of humanities subjects that address environmental issues would be too long and would have to include environmental philosophy, ecological religious studies, environmental communication and many other subjects.

Box 3	Environmental history in the classroom

1) Invite reflection: does the surrounding environment have a history? Has it always been as we see and experience it today? This experiment is described in detail in the section "Part 1: Preparation" in the following paragraph.

2) Work with students to map what has travelled from Europe to the Americas and how ecology has influenced history. The conquest of the Americas is an excellent teaching module for understanding environmental history.

3) Encourage students to think about the environmental consequences of the historical events they are studying, such as the Second World War.

An environmental storytelling and collective mapping workshop

3.1 | Learning objectives

The workshop aims to raise students' awareness of the socio-ecological crisis and involve them in a co-research project within and with their local community. During the workshop, students will be engaged in a campaign of interviews aimed at gathering testimonies on perceptions of climate and environmental change in their community.
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The option for a storytelling approach – rather than administering a questionnaire – is part of a broader educational project that sees this collection campaign as an opportunity to forge intergenerational relationships and build communities.

Storytelling can be accompanied by the use of maps to spatialise the information collected and reflect on the physicality of places.

The workshop is modular, and each learning community (class, school, informal study group, association, etc.) can choose whether to implement the entire programme or only part of it.
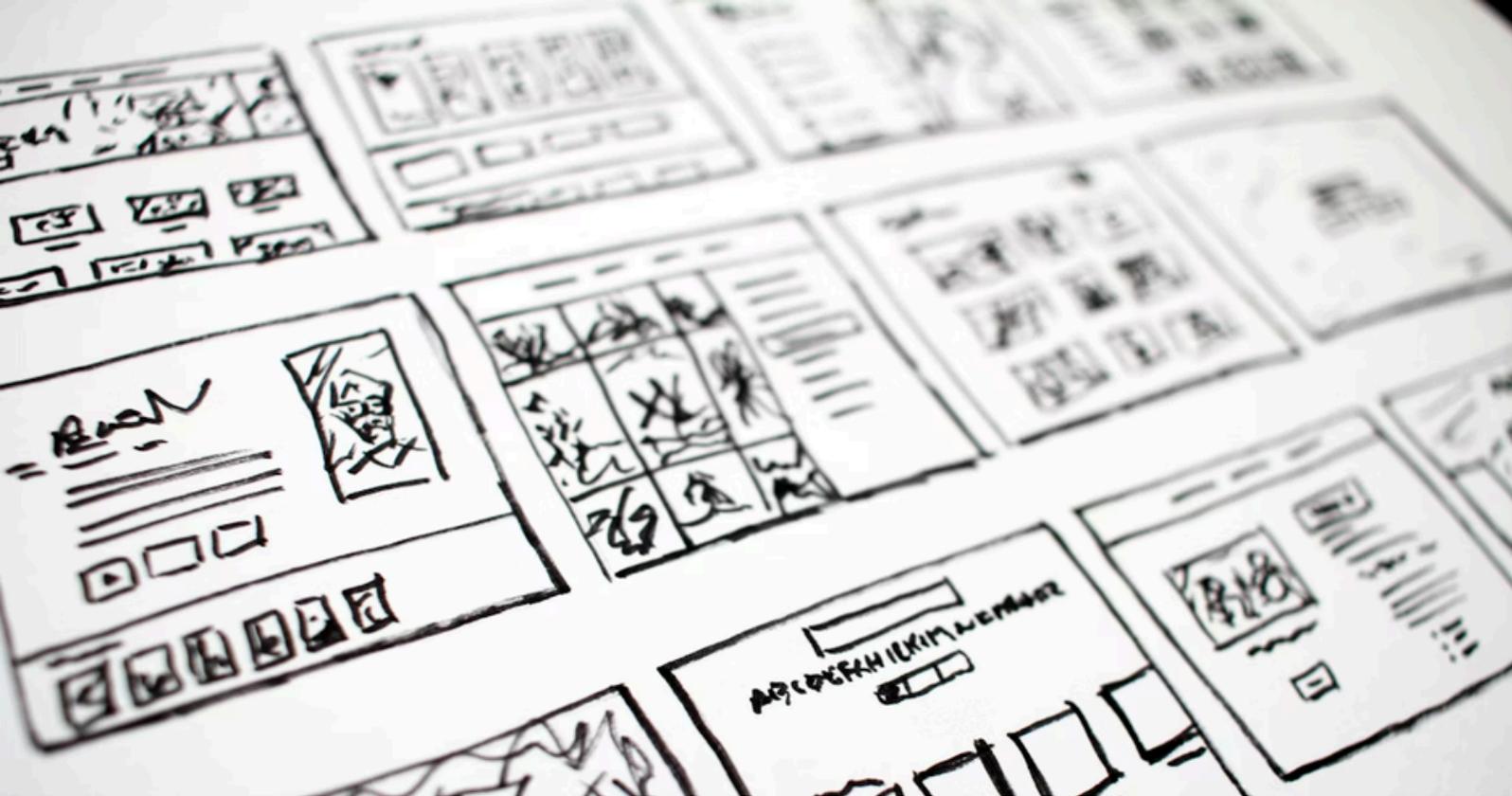
Part 1 | Debate

Objective:

To familiarise students with the historicity of the environment (= the environment has a history that is intertwined with human history)

Activity: Look for historical photographs of the area where the school is located and play a game with the students to recognise the places; note the differences with the present; reflect on the environmental consequences of the changes (more or fewer cars? Trees? Green areas? Buses? Trams? Trolleybuses? Etc.). You could also use a research technique called re-photography: students are asked to recognise the places photographed and to repeat the same photograph today to recognise the differences.

Materials: historical photos.

For example, an interesting source for Naples could be the Carbone archive (https://catalogo.archiviofotograficocarbone.it/carbone-web/documenti/detail/IT-CARBONE-FT0003-074450/quartieri-spagnoli-piazzetta-sant-anna-palazzo.html).

Box 4 | School and neighbourhood as a workshop

It is not easy to guide you through this exercise because every context is different. The type of research you can do will depend on the age of your students, the resources available in your community (is there an archive, a well-stocked library, a newspaper library, etc.), and the availability of the wider learning community (are there parents who want to help?).

Depending on the situation, we suggest several possibilities:

- Teacher-centred option - you do the research using online or perhaps analogue sources, in an archive or library. You bring the results back to the classroom and do the activity as described.
- Group work option - involve the students in the research. They will do the research described in the previous point.
- Research community option - in this case, involve the community by asking for support from families, who can lend photographs or amateur videos; local historians who can give a lesson on changes in the neighbourhood; retired teachers who can talk about changes more directly related to the school environment.

In all cases, you can plan an outdoor activity that takes the students out of the classroom to visit the places you have been working on.

Part 2 | Interviews

Objective:

To acquire knowledge through interaction with the residents of the neighbourhood in which you are working, building relationships of trust.

Activities:

See Appendix - Handbook

Materials:

Provide the handbook and interview template (see materials in the appendix)

Recommendation: It is recommended that interviews be conducted in pairs (= two students and the interviewee)

Parte 3 | Focus group

Objective:

To exchange knowledge through debate.

Activity:

See Appendix - Handbook

Materials:

Provide the handbook and maps (see materials in the appendix)

Recommendation: It is advisable to have the focus groups coordinated in pairs (= two students who coordinate and take notes for the group)

Part 4 | Imagine the future

Objective:

To stimulate imagination and design skills. An important part of our project involves exploring what the neighbourhood where the school is located might look like in the future, in relation to climate and environmental change.

Particular attention will be given to the asset that the WRENCH project is working on, which varies depending on the context.

Activity: For this part of the work, students are invited to write short stories in which they imagine what those places will be like in 30-50 years' time.

Materials: see appendix

Box 5 | Mapping territorial heritage

Territorial heritage is a concept introduced in Italy by Alberto Magnaghi, a Florentine scholar who, together with others, founded the School of Territorialists.

This expression refers to a set of elements inherited from the past, such as monuments, but also small rural houses, dirt roads, dry stone walls; at the same time, rivers, lakes, mountains, forests, land, or even a recipe, a song, a poem. These elements bear witness to how human beings have constantly transformed their living environment. It is therefore a slightly broader concept than cultural heritage, and expresses the idea that:

- cultural heritage goes beyond monumental elements;
- there is a distinction between natural and cultural heritage, highlighting instead how it is appropriate to understand the territory as an expression of the close "co-evolutionary" relationship between living beings and their living environment;
- heritage is only that which is protected by laws and the constraints that derive from them, focusing instead on widespread heritage and the way it is perceived by those who experience it.

In order to map heritage as it is widely perceived, therefore, technicians alone are not enough: we need to ask everyone what they consider important as evidence of the past, how they think this collective heritage can be used in the present, and how we can take care of it so that it remains in "good health" and can withstand and combat climate change. [continues]

Foto di Sara Pashakhanlou – Unsplash

**Box 5 | [continuing] Mapping territorial heritage**

Consider, for example, trees as part of the territorial heritage, and how they can help improve living conditions in various ways. Imagine if fruit trees were planted throughout the city: they would provide shade on hot summer days (as well as contributing to temperature regulation and oxygenation of the surrounding environment), but also access to basic nutrition – fruit – for those who do not have many options for accessing healthy food.

The map of territorial heritage serves to highlight not only what is there, or what was there and is no longer there, but also what we would like to see in the future.

Box 6 | Building a people's plan

All the information gathered from interviews and focus groups, both as oral histories and as elements identified on maps, will be incorporated into a community plan, which will contain: Memories of the neighbourhood (about the climate, but not only)
- Description of the current context (what works, what does not work, what needs to be improved)
- Focus on climate change: major critical issues
- Focus on climate change: how to improve things, with particular attention to the water cycle, waste as a resource, energy, and green space management.
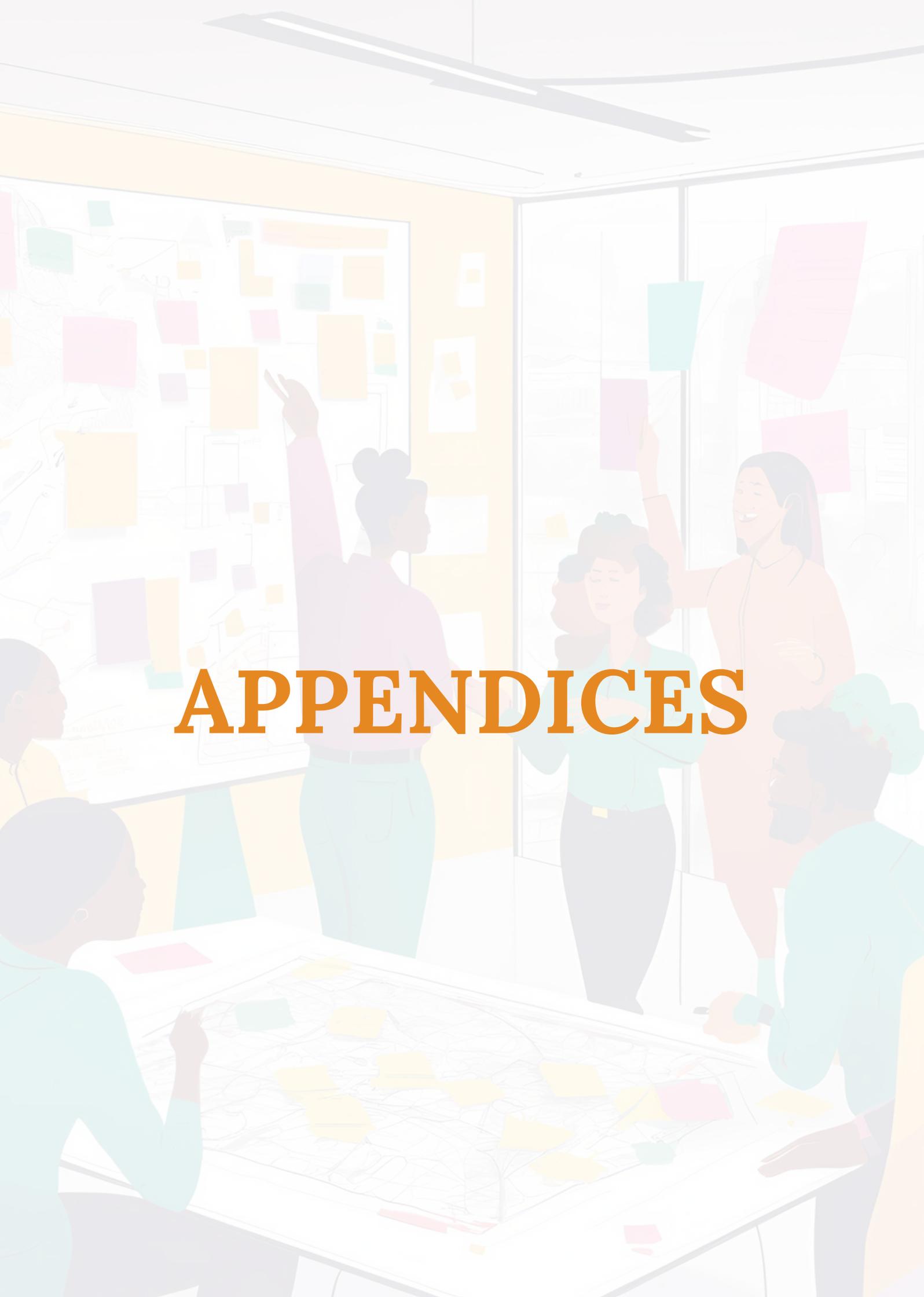
APPENDICES

Interview handbook

In this short booklet, we explain how to conduct the interview campaign, accompanied by an initial mapping campaign. We start with the selection of interviewees and end with the storage of the interviews conducted.

Selection

Make a list of about ten people you could interview. The list is longer than the number of people you will ultimately interview for two reasons: someone may withdraw (so you need a backup), and with a longer list, you will have more choices. We recommend using this template for your list.

Name and surname	Age	Where does he/she live	Type of contact
Mario Rossi	Around 60	In the neighbourhood	My uncle

Once you have made your list, select at least three people to contact, perhaps with the help of a family member or teacher.

Depending on the type of contact (it is different if it is a family member, a neighbour, or perhaps a local shopkeeper), proceed by asking if they are available for an interview. You will probably need to provide the following information: the interview can last between 20 and 90 minutes depending on the length of the answers; the interview will be recorded; the interview is for a project with your school on environmental changes in the neighbourhood. You will need to ask the interviewee for their consent to the interview, making it clear that they can interrupt it at any time. We will provide you with the WRENCH project Privacy Policy form.

Preparing for the interview

- Familiarise yourself with the questions, print out plenty of "Interview Forms" and copies of the "Privacy Policy" sheet for the number of interviews you will be conducting.
- Print out a map of the neighbourhood, which you can download from https://www.openstreetmap.org/.

Interview handbook

Make sure you have everything you need to record the interview. That is: you can record with your mobile phone; with a digital recorder; with a recording programme on your PC (e.g. Audacity (https://www.audacityteam.org/). It would be better if you use a microphone, for example you could use headphones, which often have a microphone. Check that whatever device you want to use has a charged battery; it is best to bring the charger with you. The idea is to record on two devices (e.g. two mobile phones, a mobile phone and a PC, etc.).

In agreement with the teacher, try to conduct the interview together with a classmate. You would be the interviewer and the other person would assist you. In other words, your name would be the one to put on the Privacy Policy form.

Agree with the interviewee on where to conduct the interview.
Here you need to consider two issues:
1. The technical issue. You cannot conduct the interview in a noisy place, where it will be impossible to record the conversation properly.
2. The safety issue. We who write this Handbook do not know who you will be interviewing. Our recommendation is to be cautious when dealing with people you do not know well. For this reason, we recommend going in pairs and avoiding any situation that could be dangerous. Before agreeing to an appointment, discuss it with your family or teacher.

Interview

Format: you must decide with your teacher and interviewee what format you will use for the interview. You have four options:

1. an audio recording (recommended);
2. a video recording (much more complicated);
3. an interview without recording, with your own notes (in this case, much of what is said may be lost);
4. an interview with written questions and answers.

Interview handbook

We recommend either (1) or (4); (3) is definitely the worst option, because you would have to take notes while the interviewee is speaking and you would surely miss a lot of what they say. (2) is a good solution but very complex from a technical point of view. This choice must be made by the entire school together with the teacher; however, it may happen that one of the interviewees requests a particular format. In this case, you will have to decide together with the teacher whether you want to accommodate the request or exclude the interviewee (for example: you have decided that you will follow format (1), but someone wants to do the interview in format (4) instead. You must decide whether to agree or find other people to interview who want to use format (1).

- Interview outline: The form below will guide you through the interview. Use the MAIN QUESTIONS column to start the conversation. The SECONDARY QUESTIONS column will help you if the interviewee needs guidance. Try to avoid letting the interviewee read the form. If they want to read it, you can try to explain that for the project to be successful, the interviewee must not read the sheet. But if you are unlucky and the interviewee insists on reading it, be patient…

- Minor inconveniences: if a dog starts barking, an ambulance passes by with its sirens on, a phone rings, etc., it is not a big problem. Interrupt the interview, ask them to stop talking and wait silently for the disturbance to pass. We do not recommend interrupting the recording, but simply waiting silently will suffice.

- What to do if the person says something you strongly disagree with: this is a very delicate issue. In interviews, the interviewer, i.e. you, should generally remain silent as much as possible.

- Please note: do not forget to start the recording with the formula given in the Privacy Policy, i.e. the date, the place, the person you are interviewing, whom you ask to give their consent to be recorded (they must say YES aloud).

Interview handbook

Storing and cataloguing interviews

Each interview should be saved with a specific name. We suggest that interviews be saved with the following label:

Student's surname, school, interviewee's surname. For example, let's imagine that your name is Carlo Rossi and you interviewed Marco Armiero and that your school is called Giuseppe Mazzini:
Rossi.Mazzini.Armiero.

Interviews should be saved on at least three devices/platforms: a computer hard drive; external storage (such as a pen drive); a school/teacher Dropbox.

Once saved, all interviews should be catalogued with a recognisable sequential number following this pattern:

Interview	Code	Link
Rossi.Mazzini.Armiero	Mazzini1	Here is the link where the interview is stored (a drive, or perhaps the school computer).

Preparing the maps

Go to https://www.openstreetmap.org/ and identify the area that will be the subject of the interview (not just a monument, but its surroundings, the neighbourhood).

Print a map that you will always carry with you to each interview and bring a sheet of paper that you will use as a "map legend".

Every time a place is mentioned, locate it and mark it on the map with a sequential number.

Write down on the legend: the sequential number shown on the map, the inventory number, and why that place was mentioned during the interview.

Interview handbook

Interview structure

The green section (1 to 6) must be completed before starting the interview.

1	Interviewer (first name, last name, school, class)	
2	Interviewee: first name, last name, city, neighbourhood (if he/she wish to remain anonymous, write anonymous)	
3	Date and place of interview (specific location, e.g. Rome, interviewee's home*)	
4	Age	
5	Gender	
6	Profession/Education	

IF THE INTERVIEW IS BEING RECORDED ON AUDIO OR VIDEO, READ THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT WHILE STARTING THE RECORDING:
TODAY, XXXX, AT XXXX O'CLOCK, WE ARE HERE WITH XXXX, WHOM I ASK: DO YOU CONSENT TO BEING RECORDED FOR THIS INTERVIEW?

Main and side questions

The former are used to start the conversation; the latter to keep it going.

Main questions	Side questions
How long have you lived in this neighbourhood?	
Where are you from? Are there any differences between where you come from and here? What are they?	
Can you tell me what the neighbourhood or city was like when you were my age?	*If you need help, here are some things that might help: did you walk, take the bus or ride your bike to school? What did you do after school? Where did you play and what did you play? How did you spend your holidays? Do you remember anything that used to be in the neighbourhood but is no longer there?*

Interview handbook

Main questions	Side questions
The neighbourhood or city environment. Do you remember anything about the trees, greenery, animals or other things directly related to the environment you were growing up in when you were my age?	*If you need help, you can mention things, for example: Was xxxxxxx already there? Is it true that there used to be a stream here? What animals could be seen on the street? Did that building on the corner with xxx already exist?*
Extreme weather events. Do you remember extreme weather events?	*To help: a storm or thunderstorm that left a lasting impression on you; a flood; an unexpected snowfall; a very hot summer. Or perhaps a less specific memory: what were the winters and summers like? Did you ever skip school because of a weather alert?*
What do you think has improved in the neighbourhood or city compared to when you were my age?	*Here, the interviewee may focus mainly on social issues (e.g. crime). We do not interfere too much, because we are interested in whether they mention any environmental factors. However, if they have not mentioned any environmental factors (lack of green spaces, too much traffic, pollution, waste, etc.), we can ask at the end of their answer: anything to do with the environment?*
What do you think has gotten worse in the neighbourhood or city compared to when you were my age?	*See comment above*
What does xxxx (insert reference to the cultural asset we are working on, e.g. the former military hospital, the cathedral, or the castle) mean to this community?	*To help, if necessary, could you ask: Have you ever been there? Do you remember if your parents or grandparents ever mentioned it to you? Do you think it's a good thing for the neighbourhood?*
What consequences does or could climate change have on xxx (insert reference to asset as above)?	*Here you could mention floods, extreme heat, tornadoes*
What could be done to mitigate or adapt this building to climate change?	*The question is not for specialists (it is not about naming specific techniques) but simply about thinking about how this specific building, or perhaps the entire community, could be made more suitable for climate change.*
How could we use that asset to make our community more resilient and aware of climate change?	*Ideas for using the property as a space for raising awareness*
How would you like that cultural asset to be used?	*Simply what they would like to see done with that asset in terms of activities.*
What do you think we could do together as a neighbourhood community?	

Focus group and mapping handbook
Checklist to prepare for the meeting
e what bringing with us

- A contact sheet with logos and a privacy policy for registration; pens and ID badges if many participants are expected; folders containing information materials.
- Whiteboards or flipcharts, post-it notes, markers for group exercises; a list of questions to ask.
- Large printed maps of the neighbourhood and the property in question, which can be easily created using OpenStreetMap.

Map examples taken from OpenStreetMap.
The first represents a neighbourhood, the second focuses on a heritage complex.

Tips for getting organised before/during the focus group

- Arrive half an hour early to set up the room and have a preparatory meeting with the other coordinators, if present.
- Record the focus group as you did for the interviews.
- Take photos of the board where you will stick the post-it notes containing the answers to the questions, of the map, of the group while they are working, and a final group photo.

How to interact with the large map on the wall

- Ask participants to come closer and say: Mark on the map the elements of the local heritage that may be affected by climate change or that may help mitigate climate change, and briefly write down why.
- Write a sequential number on the map with a marker pen on the places marked (if a place has already been marked, the first number written will always be used to identify that place).
- On a large white sheet of paper hung next to it (Legend), write the number, the name of the place, the reasons and (optional) the name of the person who made this contribution.

Focus group and mapping handbook

Focus group structure

The green section (1 to 3) must be completed before starting the focus group

1	School, class, name and surname of participants	
2	Date and place	
3	Names of facilitators	

READ THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT AT THE BEGINNING OF THE RECORDING: TODAY, XXXX, AT XXXX O'CLOCK, WE ARE WITH CLASS XXXX, WHICH HAS AGREED TO BE RECORDED.

Main questions	Side questions
What is the neighbourhood where the school is located like, and how does it differ from the neighbourhood where you live (if you live elsewhere)?	
Have you experienced any extreme weather events since you have been at this school?	*For example, the school closed due to a weather alert; in summer, we have no shaded areas where we can play outside, etc.*
What does xxxx (insert reference to the cultural asset we are working on, e.g. the former military hospital) mean to this school community?	
What consequences does or could climate change have on xxx (insert reference to cultural asset as above)?	
What could be done to mitigate or adapt this cultural asset to climate change?	
How could we use this cultural asset to make our community more resilient and aware of climate change?	*Ideas for using cultural heritage as a space for raising awareness*
How would you like this cultural asset to be used in relation to your school?	
What do you think we could do together as a school community? And with our "neighbours"?	

Imagining the future
Guiding questions for writing a short story

- What might the neighbourhood and, in particular, the cultural heritage site we are dealing with look like in 30-50 years' time?

- What climate issues will be very evident in 30 or 50 years? Consider the geography of the neighbourhood, consult some maps, research the projections of research institutions?

- How will these things affect the neighbourhood and the building in question?

- Do you think things could improve? If so, thanks to what?

- What do you think the community living in these areas will be like? What characteristics will it have?

- In what condition do you imagine the building we are studying will be?

- What do you imagine will have happened in the 30-50 years ahead of us?

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Heritage as Narratives
of Climate Change

A Belmont Forum Project
2025