News in Conservation

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Cover Image

Front and back covers: Ursprungsquelle in Baden bei Wien © Romana Fürnkranz. (Story on p. 18)

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Testing the Waters

How 'The Great Spa Towns of Europe' is Building Resilience Against Climate Change

By Alexandra Harrer, Scott Heron, Chiara Ronchini, Jon Day and Gerfried Koch

GREAT SPA TOWNS *of Europe*

unesco
The Great Spa Towns of Europe
Inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2021

Undinebrunnen in Baden bei Wien © c.kollerics

Heritage sites across the world are threatened by climate change, but when heritage is water itself, it complicates the crossover of protecting a traditional way of life with preserving natural resources.

The Great Spa Towns of Europe (GSTE) is a serial, transnational UNESCO World Heritage Site; one property, comprising 11 spa towns from seven European countries. At the heart of each town are springs of mineral and thermal water, used for their curative effects. Among bathhouses, promenades and cafés, these spa towns birthed the European spa phenomenon and the practice of 'taking the cure'. The property is shaped by long-standing interactions between natural resources and built heritage. Centuries later, increased weathering on historic façades is eroding

A father and son drink from a mineral spring in the Czech spa town Mariánské Lázně. ©Jordan Banks, JRNY

spa architecture like spring pavilions, bathhouses and fountain halls. Flash flooding and drought are damaging the urban fabric and may be impacting springs at ground level while parks and gardens are harmed by more frequent and sudden rainfalls and new pests. Such long-term environmental shifts may alter the places and practices that underpin the property's Outstanding Universal Value (OUV).

In 2023, UNESCO adopted the Policy Document on Climate Action for World Heritage, explicitly framing climate action as a core obligation under the World Heritage Convention. Nations that host heritage are now called upon to move beyond awareness and develop concrete, site-based solutions.

BADEN BEI WIEN: A MODEL FOR TRANSLATING GLOBAL POLICY INTO LOCAL ACTION

Against this backdrop, one of the GSTE's component towns, Baden bei Wien (Austria), launched an innovative climate change risk assessment in 2024, developing a practice-oriented tool for other heritage sites to employ.

As well as being the only Austrian town within the GSTE, Baden bei Wien is the first Austrian World Heritage Site within a certified Climate & Energy Model Region, a regional climate governance framework that integrates renewable energy and climate adaptation strategies. This dual positioning, at the intersection of heritage protection and climate policy, enables Baden bei Wien to explore what climate action means in practice.

The assessment was guided by experts from James Cook University (Australia), who have developed and applied internationally the Climate Vulnerability Index (CVI)— a globally recognised methodology for assessing climate risks to OUV and their associated communities. The project is funded through Austria's Climate & Energy Model Region Programme, highlighting the growing integration of climate governance and heritage management.

DESIGNED TO SUPPORT

The CVI was developed to support managers and other stakeholders of World Heritage properties in planning the future protection of their sites. Starting from the documented values and attributes of significance, the CVI process intersects these with potential climate threats to identify the greatest risks to heritage. It uses the best available climate science, both historical and projected, to help understand impacts to the values that have already occurred and those that might arise.

Many aspects of heritage have an intrinsic capacity to absorb threats through natural adaptive processes. This can be complemented by management strategies that respond directly to the identified climate risks. The CVI process also considers how communities are impacted. A climate change -related decline in the heritage values may affect individual and shared identity, societal fabric and business activities. Many CVI participants have commented on the important perspective this assessment provides, including how it helps community members to understand and support management actions.

NO ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL

The CVI is typically applied through intensive multi-day workshops that bring together diverse stakeholders. Heritage managers, climate scientists, business operators, conservationists, community members and other local experts assess climate threats collaboratively and identify priority actions.

Applications in over twenty heritage locations around the world have demonstrated there is no one-size-fits-all solution to climate change. Different places with different heritage values are being (and will be) affected in various ways by climate

Nations that host heritage are now called upon to move beyond awareness of climate action and develop concrete, site-based solutions.

change. The CVI enables heritage managers to identify adaptive strategies tailored to their properties.

APPLYING THE CVI IN BADEN BEI WIEN

In Baden bei Wien, twenty climate and heritage experts from Australia, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Scotland—and, of course, Austria!—came together in October 2025 for a three-day workshop. Most convened in person in the Baden City Hall while others participated online. This hybrid workshop was a central element of the climate change risk assessment, conducted in cooperation with the Austrian Climate and Energy Fund, GeoSphere Austria and the Austrian UNESCO Commission.

Rather than focusing solely on outcomes, the workshop was designed as a structured, participatory process that connected scientific expertise, local knowledge and institutional perspectives. Using multiple future scenarios, climate change projections were used to indicate anticipated conditions in the coming decades and identify key threats to heritage. Increased temperature, changing rainfall patterns, drought and flooding were noted as potential threats to some World Heritage attributes. Participants observed that some climate-associated changes were already apparent, including surface water movement during heavy rain events and changing species in the surrounding forest landscape.

For the anticipated and already-occurring climate impacts, preventative strategies were identified and corresponding actions discussed. These included the management of surface water during heavy rain (also taking into account parking areas where groundwater transfer is important); the key role of trees in both urban and forest landscapes (both facing effects of droughts, wildfires and changes in biodiversity); and retrofitting of spa buildings to improve their energy efficiency (potentially using traditional techniques, such as locally-sourced, breathable, lime-based finishes for thermal regulation, or traditional paving materials for more effective rain absorption).

At this stage, Baden's experience should be understood not as a completed model but as a work in progress, highlighting the opportunities, challenges and learning potential inherent in embedding climate risk assessment within World Heritage site management. Its results will inform the final project report, including a consolidated assessment of risks and response capacity, for publication in June 2026.

GREATER IMPLICATIONS: CONNECTING CLIMATE ACTION ACROSS THE GREAT SPA TOWNS OF EUROPE

Baden's climate vulnerability assessment represents more than a local initiative. It's a testing ground for tackling shared challenges across all 11 towns comprising the GSTE property, which faces unique complexities. Each town operates under different national legislation and local management systems, yet all are united through shared governance structures designed for collective action. While each town contributes its unique character to the series, they must be protected as one cohesive heritage with shared values and attributes that tell the story of European spa culture.

This shared heritage, for example, the spa architecture, therapeutic landscapes and the natural springs themselves, means the GSTE towns function as an interconnected whole. If something happens to one component, such as significant damage to its heritage values and attributes, this can have

Clockwise from top: Beethoventempel in the Kurpark Baden bei Wien © Romana Fürnkranz / Scott Heron presenting at the CVI workshop in Baden bei Wien © Alexandra Harrer / Coat of arms of Baden bei Wien © Lois Lammerhuber / Group photo with workshop participants in Baden bei Wien © Sophie Natter

consequences for the entire series, undermining the coherence of the World Heritage property.

This interdependence carries significant implications for climate risk. If climate change degrades key spa buildings in one town, this impact doesn't just affect that individual component; it threatens the integrity of the entire property. This is why coordinated climate action across the GSTE is both logical and essential.

CORE INSIGHTS IN BADEN AND BEYOND

In essence, the CVI analysis confirms a high vulnerability of the OUV, alongside a substantial but not yet fully activated adaptive capacity. This capacity can counteract identified risks only if it is systematically translated into tangible, sustained action.

Future effects on the community were assessed at the upper limit of moderate risk (close to high risk). In practice, while the

workshop demonstrated that climate change is firmly recognised as a core management issue for Baden, there is strong stakeholder readiness to address climate-related risks through participatory approaches.

At the same time, the discussions highlighted the current limits of conceptual exchange. While climate-related dialogue is well established, the process has not yet been formally integrated into Baden's official response to UNESCO's climate policy requirements. Moving from dialogue to implementation will require further, targeted work.

The workshop reinforced lessons seen from other CVI applications across 20+ heritage sites worldwide; effective facilitation has been invaluable when integrating aspects of heritage and climate, and climate change requires responses that are customised to individual heritage places. Baden's specific risks—from surface water management to spa building efficiency—differ from other GSTE spa towns, just as each

Ursprungsquelle in Baden bei Wien
© Romana Fürnkranz

CVI workshop in Baden bei Wien © Alexandra

town's adaptive capacity reflects its unique local context, resources and stakeholder networks. This diversity underscores why site specific, participatory assessment processes like the CVI are essential!

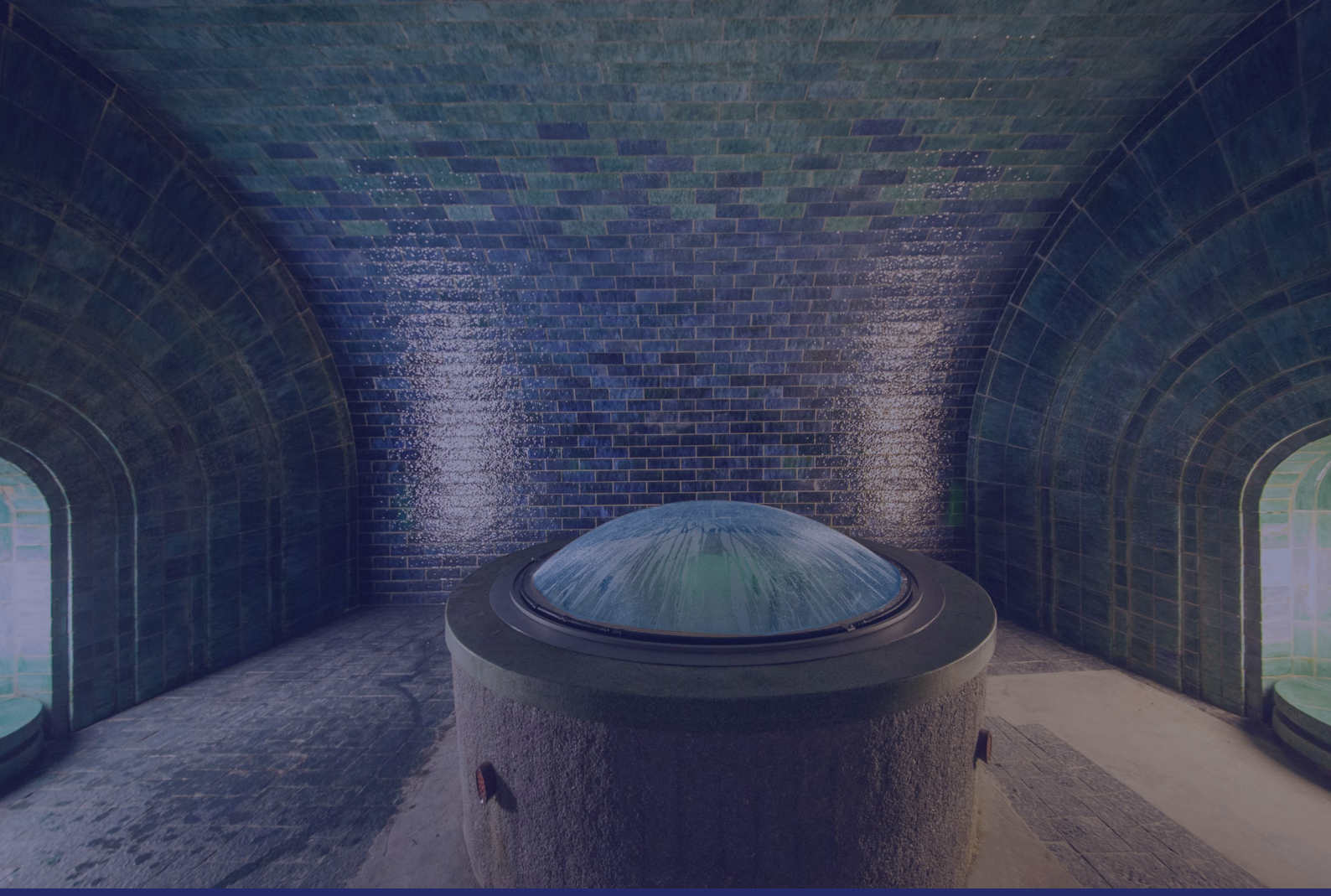
CONTEXTUAL AND COMPLEMENTARY

For the GSTE, Baden's CVI process runs alongside the Preserving Legacies programme, another climate adaptation methodology being tested in three other GSTE towns: Bath, Spa and Vichy. Together, these dual approaches offer a pathway for capacity building across the network. Both methodologies harness rigorous science while prioritising community engagement, providing complementary tools that other towns can adapt to their circumstances. At a time where funding comes at a premium and heritage properties face mounting climate pressures, sharing effective, tested approaches is vital for protecting these outstanding places for future generations. Through the CVI, Baden is now positioned to undertake identified next steps and lead efforts within the GSTE and beyond to safeguard European spa heritage.

Alexandra Harrer is an architectural historian trained in Europe, the United States, China, and Japan. She holds a master's degree from the Vienna University of Technology and a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania. Until 2023, she was associate professor at Tsinghua University in Beijing. Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site Manager in Austria, she works to protect the serial transnational property of the Great Spa Towns of Europe in Baden bei Wien.

Scott Heron is UNESCO Chair on Climate Change Vulnerability of Natural and Cultural Heritage and professor of physics at James Cook University, Australia. Scott's research group focuses on climate vulnerability of heritage (through the CVI, co-developed with Jon Day) and impacts on marine and coastal ecosystems. He was named on Reuters Hot List 2021 of the world's top climate scientists.

Chiara Ronchini is an independent heritage expert and Secretary General of The Great Spa Towns of Europe. An architect and urbanist with 17 years' experience in cultural heritage, she champions participatory approaches to management, climate action and responsible tourism. Chiara serves as an ICCROM consultant and on ICOMOS committees addressing energy sustainability and human rights. Her career spans Historic Environment Scotland, Edinburgh World Heritage and UNESCO across four continents.



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