



Just Transition Platform – Project fiche:

REVITALISATION OF ST. MICHAEL'S FORTRESS – FROM AN ABANDONED MILITARY RELIC TO A REGIONAL CULTURAL CENTRE

Croatia, Šibenik-Knin County

This document is part of a series presenting information and lessons learned on policy approaches at national, regional or local level supporting a just transition to a climate-neutral economy. The Just Transition Platform (JTP) assists EU Member States and regions to unlock the support in this transition. Visit the JTP website: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/funding/just-transition-fund/just-transition-platform_en

Member State:

Croatia

Region:

Šibenik-Knin County

Sector:

Culture and tourism

Total project budget (in €):¹

1 666 436.16

(1 million from the European Regional Development Fund)

Sources of funding (in €):**EU funding:**

999 947.40 Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) III

Regional funding:

666 436.16

Project duration:

26.5 months

Responsible managing authority / agency / company:

Municipality of Šibenik

Summary

The St. Michael's Fortress restoration project has achieved significant outcomes and results. It contributed to the city's transition from an industrial town, which had faced economic challenges with the closure of factories and a decline in industries.² The fortress was neglected for several decades, but through the project's efforts, it was transformed into a new, dynamic part of the city. The fortress, previously in a dire state with no amenities like restrooms, was improved to offer more than just scenic views. In the 1960s, the idea to refurbish the fortress

emerged, including the possibility of creating a stage or theatre within it. This concept gained traction in the 1990s, and in 2008, a local architect proposed the addition of a stage. The project involved construction and the incorporation of a stage. In addition to these physical improvements, the project encompassed a range of cultural activities, such as mapping cultural institutions in the city, making cultural plans, and branding the city.

¹ Budgetary information sourced from [Revitalization Project | St. Michael's Fortress | Šibenik fortresses \(tvrđjava-kulture.hr\)](#)

² See: [ST. MICHAEL'S FORTRESS – from an abandoned military relic to a regional cultural centre | Interreg Europe - Sharing solutions for better policy](#)

Type of activities:

The St. Michael's Fortress restoration project encompassed a range of activities³ including (but not limited to) infrastructural works (e.g. open-air stage with 1 077 seats, the refurbishment of the underground part of the fortress), planning and studies (e.g. preparation of the cultural brand of the City of Šibenik), educational programmes and the set-up of a helpdesk to provide 50 hours of consulting services to local stakeholders interested in the project. Further, promotional materials were created in six languages to advertise the project. To create an authentic historical ambiance, medieval replicas, and costumes were produced for the fortress staff. To summarise, the activities undertaken during this project combined restoration, cultural promotion, infrastructure improvement, and community engagement to revitalise St. Michael's Fortress and enhance its cultural significance.

Goals and approach:

The project's primary objective was to contribute to the sustainable economic growth of Šibenik and its surrounding region through the development of cultural tourism⁴. To achieve this, the project employed a range of approaches.

One key aspect was infrastructure improvement. This entailed significant infrastructural enhancements, including the construction of an open-air stage within the fortress, thereby transforming it from a historical site into a vibrant venue for cultural events. Cultural promotion, which included mapping cultural institutions, creating cultural plans, and branding Šibenik as a cultural destination, played a pivotal role in the project. Community engagement, fostered in part through a consulting Helpdesk for stakeholders, was an essential component of the project. This engagement with the community was fundamental to the project's success. Educational programmes were put in place to increase awareness and appreciation of Šibenik's cultural heritage and the historical significance of the fortress. Moreover, branding initiatives were implemented to distinguish the project in the competitive cultural and tourism sectors.

The project's impact led to the establishment of the 'Fortress of Culture', which oversaw various cultural assets in the city. This transformation gained national recognition and drew a diverse range of cultural events and visitors, solidifying Šibenik's status as a cultural hub.

Important outputs, results or achievements:

The impact of this project on the city of Šibenik was substantial. The refurbishment of St. Michael's fortress and the addition of cultural elements facilitated the transition away from Šibenik's industrial past. The city evolved into a vibrant cultural scene, becoming a hub for cultural events, with a remarkable number of events for a city of its size. The project also led to the establishment of the "Fortress of

Culture," a new cultural institution that manages not only St. Michael's Fortress along with two other forts, the city cinema, and the cultural centre on an island. This cultural transformation received recognition at the national level, with a diverse range of cultural events that, while not primarily commercial, were highly regarded for their artistic value and attracted both local and international visitors.

Scalability⁵ and transferability⁶:

The concept behind the St. Michael's Fortress restoration project is indeed scalable and transferrable to other regions. The core idea is to revitalise neglected urban spaces, both indoor and outdoor, which have lost their original relevance in modern life. These empty or underutilised spaces can be repurposed with new and attractive content, breathing fresh life into them and reintegrating them into the city's vibrancy. This approach involves leveraging new management skills to initiate projects that not only rejuvenate these buildings but also contribute to the city's branding. Furthermore, it can play a pivotal role in transitioning the entire city towards different economic

sectors, potentially revitalising entire neighbourhoods or even the entire city, depending on the project's scale and ambition.

The management model – establishing an institution that has the human and financial resources to manage a historical, but also contemporary cultural monument daily (scientific research, event organisation, marketing, and sales, technical management, investments, project conception and implementation) – has been accepted and studied in Croatia.

³ See: [Revitalization Project | St. Michael's Fortress | Šibenik fortresses \(tvrđjava-kulture.hr\)](#)

⁴ See: [Revitalization Project | St. Michael's Fortress | Šibenik fortresses \(tvrđjava-kulture.hr\)](#)

⁵ Scalability entails that a policy approach can be adapted to a bigger scale than just the local context.

⁶ Transferability entails that a policy approach can be applicable to a similar setting and replicated.

Tools for supporting economic diversification and reskilling/upskilling via projects:

- Ensuring well-targeted financing and investment
- Capitalising on unique regional strengths for innovation
- Capitalising on regional cultural heritage to facilitate the transition away from the industrial past.

Key success factors and lessons learnt:

There are three key success factors of the restoration of St. Michael's Fortress project according to managing authority. First, it is essential to start with an appealing project that goes beyond preserving beautiful buildings in their original state. Most structures require engaging and relevant content to attract visitors. Actively shaping the project's appeal is crucial.

Second, successful restoration project requires a well-structured governance model with a diverse team that includes individuals from different backgrounds and education levels. Cross-sector communication and clear roles in programme policy and budgeting are vital. This dedicated team is needed to take over the facilities after project completion.

Finally, in a competitive field, effective branding and marketing are indispensable. The project must be well-branded to stand out, especially given the strong competition in the cultural and tourism sectors. This branding should contribute to long-term success and financial self-sufficiency, enabling the managing authority to not only cover workforce expenses but also fund future projects.

Key challenges:

There were some challenges faced by the managing authority during the restoration of St. Michael's Fortress. Inadequate funding posed a major hurdle. This was partly caused by the cultural heritage status of the site. Working on heritage buildings presented issues due to strict preservation regulations, necessitating the use of skilled but more expensive materials and labour. Unforeseen discoveries during excavation also demanded project adjustments, leading to delays and increased costs. Furthermore, opposition from certain segments of the public and institutions complicated the restoration process, as some argued against changing the fortress's original purpose, which conflicted with effective reconstruction practices.

Central framework conditions⁷:

For 600 years, St. Michael's Fortress, the oldest historical site in the Croatian city of Šibenik, was closed to the public and was used for military purposes. Nowadays, its interior is a vast space without almost any preserved structures.

Šibenik's economy had suffered in the 1990s and to recover, the city started orienting itself towards cultural tourism. Thus, the idea to convert this fortress into an open-air stage was raised at the end of the 2000s. With Croatian accession to the EU approaching, some pre-accession EU funds were opened to this end.

Finally, a project called Revitalization of St. Michael's Fortress applied for funding and was approved in 2012, with a goal "to contribute to the sustainable economic growth of Šibenik and the surrounding region through the development and broadening of cultural tourism." Several studies and plans were prepared within the project, with educational and promotional activities being produced as well. St. Michael's Fortress was reopened on 6 July 2014.

Outlook:

Nowadays, St. Michael's Fortress is a recognisable monument of cultural heritage in the very heart of Šibenik which promotes revalorisation and revitalisation of Croatian cultural assets.

As a cultural space, it has become one of the most prestigious stages in the region, which organises various cultural, musical, and theatrical events, thus contributing to the image of the Republic of Croatia, and especially the city of Šibenik.

⁷ Framework conditions encompass the institutional, informational and socio-economic factors that determine a given environment (contextual information), e.g. market conditions, access to finance, tax regulation, infrastructure and support.

Project partners & contacts:

- City of Šibenik
- Šibenik City Museum
- Croatian National Theatre in Šibenik
- Šibenik Tourist Board

Website / social media:

<https://www.interregeurope.eu/good-practices/st-michaels-fortress-from-an-abandoned-military-relic-to-a-regional-cultural-centre>

<https://www.tvrdjava-kulture.hr/en/st-michaels-fortress/revitalization-project>

Sources:

- Inforegio (2018): Unleashing the tourism potential of historical fortresses in the western Balkans. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/projects/Croatia/unleashing-the-tourism-potential-of-historical-fortresses-in-the-western-balkans
- Interreg Europe (2019): ST. MICHAEL'S FORTRESS: from an abandoned military relic to a regional cultural centre. Available at: <https://www.interregeurope.eu/good-practices/st-michaels-fortress-from-an-abandoned-military-relic-to-a-regional-cultural-centre>
- Interview with representative of Šibenik Municipality, 2nd November 2023.
- Fortress of Culture Sibenik (2023): Revitalization Project | St. Michael's Fortress. Available at: <https://www.tvrdjava-kulture.hr/en/st-michaels-fortress/revitalization-project>