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# Harmonising sustainability in theatres as catalysts for resilience

Annamaria Esposito\*, Angela Besana\*\*, Chiara Fisichella\*\*\*

## *Abstract*

This paper seeks to highlight the critical role that theatres play in fostering resilience and sustainability and underscores the significance of a holistic approach to sustainability thanks to a qualitative analysis of five Milanese theatres. The findings highlight the potential of theatres to act as catalysts for society's reflection, dialogue, and action towards sustainability, emphasising the indispensable role of community involvement and stakeholder collaboration. The investigation reveals that the sustainability of theatres depends on global strategies that include management efficiency, marketing innovation, and diversification of funding. Digitisation of archives and sustainable production practices emerge as pivotal

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in minimising environmental impacts and preserving cultural heritage. Simultaneously, innovative staging, audience engagement in sustainability, and the development of new works addressing current sustainability challenges serve to amplify the societal impact of theatres.

Questo lavoro cerca di evidenziare il ruolo critico dei teatri nel promuovere la sostenibilità e, grazie a un'indagine qualitativa su cinque teatri milanesi, sottolinea l'importanza di un approccio olistico alla sostenibilità. I risultati evidenziano il potenziale dei teatri nel fungere da catalizzatori per la riflessione, il dialogo e l'azione della società verso la sostenibilità, sottolineando il ruolo indispensabile del coinvolgimento della comunità e della collaborazione degli stakeholder. L'analisi rivela che la sostenibilità dei teatri dipende da strategie globali che comprendono l'efficienza della gestione, l'innovazione del marketing e la diversificazione dei finanziamenti. La digitalizzazione degli archivi e le pratiche di produzione sostenibili si rivelano fondamentali per ridurre al minimo l'impatto ambientale e preservare il patrimonio culturale. Allo stesso tempo, gli allestimenti innovativi, il coinvolgimento del pubblico nella sostenibilità e lo sviluppo di nuove opere teatrali, che affrontano le attuali sfide della sostenibilità, amplificano l'impatto sociale dei teatri.

## 1. *Introduction*

Sustainability is a concept that is defined, analysed, and measured across many sectors, including the cultural and creative industries. It concerns the long term and the ability to maintain the recovery and positive or countercyclical performances achieved thanks to resilience<sup>1</sup>. This concept refers to the ability of an organisation to cope with crisis and extraordinary circumstances and requires timing, engagement, and strategies that enable recovery, the reduction of uncertainty, and the restoration of capability in the short term, as well as in the long term. However, it is not only a matter of time: resilience is also concerned with financial viability, while sustainability is not only a matter of economic achievements but also environmental and social ones. Both commit organisations to redesigning relations with all stakeholders, i.e. their original and new audiences<sup>2</sup>. Both of them lead to diversification in terms of funding. Effective management and communication are crucial to addressing sustainability in theatres, museums, and other cultural organisations and administrations. The impact of the pandemic has prompted theatre management to become more resilient and to focus more on sustainability and marketing innovation<sup>3</sup>.

Recent data reflect the resilience of Italian theatre. According to the 2023

<sup>1</sup> Fristoe, Longacre 2024; Herrero, Kraemer 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Caust 2021; Dragičević, Stefanović 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Lin 2023; Pulido *et al.* 2022; Lobo-Guerrero *et al.* 2021.

report produced by the Italian Society of Authors and Publishers (SIAE)<sup>4</sup>, the sector's recovery continues, with around 3.5 million shows marking a double-digit percentage increase compared to the previous year (+14.9%), although it still trails behind 2019 levels (18.5%). Lombardy stands out as a leader in entertainment, hosting approximately 640,000 events in 2023, which accounts for 18% of the national total.

In particular, the dramatic theatre sector, which began its recovery in 2022, fully returned to pre-pandemic levels in 2023, with a 5% increase over 2019 figures, marking its best performance ever. Over 90,000 shows attracted more than 15 million attendees, generating over 250 million euros in revenue. Most of these shows were concentrated in the northern regions (47%), with Lombardy leading the way, producing 14,600 shows, or 16% of the national supply.

The SIAE report also emphasises the concept of economic sustainability, referring to the ability of theatres to cover costs and generate sufficient revenue to support future programming. Milan and Rome remain the top cities for performing arts, with Milan standing out for its well-established theatre networks and vibrant events, as well as its increasing use of new technologies to engage audiences.

Supported by a review of the relevant literature, and the analysis of five case studies from the Milanese context, the primary focus of this study is the sustainability of theatres according to different definitions of the term (economic, environmental, social and cultural) and how sustainability is implemented in a sample of Milanese theatres, including the strategic use of their heritage. This paper seeks to further explore the critical role that theatres can play in fostering sustainability. The integration of effective management practices, innovative marketing strategies, and sustainable funding mechanisms, and the strategic use of theatrical heritage will be examined, taking into consideration the specific dynamics of the Milanese theatre scene. These case studies will provide a practical and concrete perspective on how theatres, through a holistic management approach, can contribute to achieving sustainability goals, balancing economic, environmental, social, and cultural dimensions to ensure long term viability.

The analysis of these real-world examples will also highlight the potential of theatres to act as catalysts for societal reflection and action toward sustainability. Particular attention will be given to community engagement and stakeholders' collaboration as key elements in driving sustainable development within the theatre sector, emphasising the importance of a collective and participatory approach within the theatre landscape.

<sup>4</sup> SIAE 2023.

## 2. Literature review

This literature review explores various interpretations of sustainability, with environmental, economic, and social dimensions highlighted through key cited authors. While all aspects are relevant, particular attention is given to sustainability within the cultural and creative industries, especially theatre. The review adopts a scientific rather than geographical or comparative approach, with a focus on the Italian theatre sector supported by recent reports. The selection includes both recent scientific contributions and texts considered “classics”, with the aim of offering a complete and more detailed overview of the topic.

### 2.1. Sustainability

Sustainability is a multidimensional concept. Several works define sustainability by emphasising the natural sciences or social sciences approach, from sociology to economics, and from management to marketing and digital marketing.

The concept of sustainability is of critical importance and encompasses both content and media, as well as the internal and external communication strategies of organisations, including profit driven entities, nonprofits, public administrations, and both conventional and unconventional forms of destination management. Industries such as tourism are increasingly required to align with sustainability imperatives<sup>5</sup>. The definition of sustainability is rooted in natural sciences, specifically disciplines such as biology, ecology, and environmental sciences. However, it evolved into an interdisciplinary field during the 1960s and 1970s, catalysed by key publications that marked the rise of the environmental movement and encouraged a transdisciplinary approach integrating economics, communication, natural sciences, and social sciences. From the outset, the debate centred on the complex interaction between the natural environment and human made systems, highlighting the challenges of this coexistence. As individuals and organisations interact with the environment, the resulting impacts are not always positive, prompting the early and primary focus on defining environmental sustainability.

Adopting a political economy perspective, *The problem of social cost*<sup>6</sup> forms the foundation for studying transaction costs related to addressing the negative externalities of production, such as environmental damage borne by third parties. Solutions to these externalities often require private negotiations between organisations, individuals, citizens, and communities. Carson’s *Silent Spring*<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Hallinger 2020; Stephenson 2023; Ukko *et al.* 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Coase 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Carson 1962; Paull 2013.

exposed the environmental harm caused by the unchecked use of pesticides, highlighting the subsequent responsibility for these damages and the need for shared compensation mechanisms, like in the previously mentioned theory of transaction costs. Similarly, Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*<sup>8</sup> emphasised the problem of overpopulation, urging population control while considering environmental constraints, based on studies that re-evaluated population dynamics. *Limits to Growth*<sup>9</sup> examined the limits of population growth, resource consumption, and technological progress in relation to the earth's carrying capacity, suggesting that these trends are incompatible with sustainable development. When human demands exceed the planet's regenerative capacities, and the private marginal benefit of a few outweighs the social costs for the majority, unsustainable development becomes an inevitable outcome. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*<sup>10</sup> criticises large scale industrial models, advocating instead smaller, more context appropriate technologies, programmes, and governance structures. Schumacher posits that smaller communities, through what he terms the "invisible foot", could manage shared environmental resources more effectively than the *laissez-faire* mechanisms symbolised by the "invisible hand".

The year 1987 was one of the most important moments in the debate on sustainable development: it was the year in which the report *Our Common Future* was published by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED)<sup>11</sup>. In 1997, John Elkington, with the *Triple Bottom Line*, argued that sustainable development is multidimensional and based around ecological, social, and economic variables and measurements<sup>12</sup>. These three dimensions are considered pillars of sustainability, the so called "three Es" (environment, economy, and equity), otherwise referred to as the three Ps (people, planet, and profit) in business and investment contexts. In the matching of Es with Ps there are implications for both the role of the Welfare State and the joint roles of for profit and nonprofit organisations.

In 2008, Nicholas Stern called for intergenerational dialogue on estimating the expected value of the impact of climate change. In his founding article *The Economics of Climate Change*, he encourages economists to change their perspective on micro and macroeconomic growth<sup>13</sup>. In *A time for action on climate change and a time for change in economics*<sup>14</sup>, he aggregates micro and macroeconomic approaches to advocate a cautious revision of models that

<sup>8</sup> Ehrlich 1968.

<sup>9</sup> Meadows *et al.* 1972.

<sup>10</sup> Schumacher 1973.

<sup>11</sup> WCED 1987.

<sup>12</sup> Elkington 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Henry *et al.* 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Stern 2022.

integrate parameters and measurements and that may be poorly predictive in the face of accelerations in climate change and extraordinary events (including the health crisis). It is not only a matter of overcoming the separation between the microeconomic and macroeconomic approaches, but also of adapting theory and empirical evidence to undeniable accelerations to complicated models, which claim to integrate several variables, analyses, and frameworks. The entrepreneur – the microeconomic approach – can compensate for negative externalities and can implement new measures and new sustainability indicators in accounting, so that economic sustainability becomes a fundamental predictor, synthesis, and *amalgamation* of other sustainability issues, from the environmental one – with cost benefit analysis – to the social one of multiple stakeholders' relations. At the microeconomic level, the sum of accounting of many organisations and firms, and individual choices makes the accounting of nations and their macroeconomic reputation on the issue of sustainability.

The UN 2030 Agenda represents an important step in the evolution of the concept and practices of sustainability, because the profit and nonprofit sectors are beginning to become aware of the need to comply with certain environmental and social goals (17 goals). They must commit themselves to achieving these goals.

## 2.2. *Sustainability in the cultural-creative sector and theatres*

In the cultural sector, sustainability issues have been internalised and “made into an experience” – first, to adapt to quality standards and environmental sustainability goals. The approach to sustainability in the performing arts consists not only in bringing climate priorities into texts and theatrical performance, but also in enhancing<sup>15</sup> the relationships between performance and outdoor places, stakeholders, and above all, communities, between materials and management of both stocks (warehouses) and waste, between human resources and digital ones, between pre-production, production, post-production, and energy saving. Sustainability is one of the priorities of theatre management. This relevant topic is confirmed in some reports and data about cultural organisations, and visual and performing arts in Italy. According to the latest Consumer Insights by STATISTA titled *Target audience: Theater, ballet & opera goers in Italy*<sup>16</sup>, Italian theatre goers are strong supporters of sustainability: of the investigated sample, 55% care about unemployment, 46% about health and social security, 45% about poverty, 41% about climate change, and 40% about the environment. In June and July 2025, the Santagata Foun-

<sup>15</sup> Pulido *et al.* 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Statista September 2024.

dation delivered results of the research “4C – Cultural and Creative Carbon Cut” about awareness and management of sustainability for a large sample, which includes theatres, audiovisual and movie industry, and the research gave evidence of different approaches, different projects and performances of a significant Italian sample towards sustainability issues<sup>17</sup>. Under the Creative Europe Programme, 81 projects about “sustainable theatre” shows Italy to be the coordinator of more than 20 projects about green transition, inclusion, and digital transformation (last updated on 28th February)<sup>18</sup>.

Economic sustainability concerns the long-term viability of a cultural enterprise, while accounting and accountability means the integration between standards and innovative indicators for sustainability. It is not only a matter of expenses and financial performances. It is economic sustainability, which matches productivity and revenue management with the quality of theatrical seasons and the enhancement of connections with all stakeholders. The survival and development of theatres is founded on their project capabilities, their collaborations, their networks, and their co-design efforts, particularly as regards their connections with local, urban, and neighborhood communities. These factors enable economic performances and sustainability. This scenario of multiple stakeholders’ engagement is not only a matter of efforts, expenses, and revenue generation but also implies social sustainability.

Most of the accounting of economic sustainability involves supporting transparency and the reputation for environmental sustainability. This type of sustainability mostly affects theatrical production planning and management, and it generates awareness and commitment among artists, boards, employees, and producers with this comprehensive advocacy, which can radically reform the sector. Furthermore, all stakeholders are sensitive to a transgenerational and environmental legacy, which implies today’s energy saving and waste recycling. This is the kind of sustainability that historically, and in the evolution of the concept of sustainability, places the theatre within society and social relationships, which reward these sensitivities<sup>19</sup>.

Social sustainability concerns the relationships between theatres, territories, and societies. Theatres disseminate missions and advocacy, and their relational skills create and support inclusive contexts, which multiply dialogue, exchange

<sup>17</sup> Fondazione Santagata 2024. Since when it was founded in 2018, the Foundation has been actively involved in projects of research, training and support within five areas: the management of cultural heritage; the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage; the enhancement of tourism related to cultural heritage sites and creative clusters; the promotion of a just ecological transition.

<sup>18</sup> Finished and ongoing projects can be updated at the following link <<https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/projects-results?order=DESC&pageNumber=1&pageSize=100&sortBy=title&keywords=Theatre&isExactMatch=false&frameworkProgramme=43251814>>, 20.08.2025.

<sup>19</sup> Newton, Taylor 2020.

of new ideas, and the potential for innovation<sup>20</sup>. The theatre enhances wellbeing in terms of identity values, inclusion, and cohesion for today's generation and those to come. The legacy of a theatre is not only for today's inclusive communities but also for tomorrows, and consequently, cultural sustainability is defined.

Cultural sustainability sparks a virtuous cycle for creating values, attitudes, and behaviours within local communities. It represents a regenerative and long-lasting sustainability that supports a new human regenerative culture. With heritage, archives, and histories, the theatre is a common and public good, whose indivisibility and non-exclusivity make it a vital resource capable of fostering culture, beauty, and economic vitality, even in quarters that have deteriorated. The theatre has always mirrored the times and must return to being a place for everyone, shaping the future for the next generations.

The literature review herein is developed around the most recent articles concerning sustainability and its different definitions in the creative industries and in the theatre (Tab. 1). The analysis considers papers from 2020 to 2024, so considering also pandemic and post-pandemic years, which commits those theatres investigated here to enhancing resilience and to strengthening efforts to attain sustainability. In indexed journals, the review was developed through keywords and disciplinary approaches based around social sciences, with a particular focus on a bibliometric approach. From the wide topic of cultural and creative industries, the analysis was deepened in relation to theatres, as shown in the last row about "sustainability in theatres" in Table 1. Monographs have not been considered. Furthermore, in order to define a general scenario, the research only considered conceptual papers.

In cultural and creative industries, sustainability is a concern on both the supply side and the demand side of markets. On the demand side, there is a very recent consideration given to tourists' advocacy of sustainability. The sustainable theatre is not only appreciated by personnel, boards, and artists but also by local, regional, national, and international audiences, and tourists must be committed to sustainability, wherever they are<sup>21</sup>. As long as cultural and creative industries have got boundaries, the sustainability issue mainly concerns local and urban boundaries<sup>22</sup>. Nevertheless, the regional relevance is also important<sup>23</sup>. Alongside approaches that can include sociology<sup>24</sup>, organisation and management approaches emphasise the microeconomic importance of the accountability of sustainability and of reliable business models, which can refer to both tangible and intangible heritage<sup>25</sup>. Some papers collect literature reviews<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Beer, Hes 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Ottaviani *et al.* 2024; Sajib *et al.* 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Bertoni *et al.* 2021; Naheed, Shooshtarian 2022; Ordonez-Ponce 2023.

<sup>23</sup> Hongjia *et al.* 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Kanzola, Panagiotis 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Esposito, Vannini 2021; Lin 2023; Murillo-Aviña *et al.* 2022; Tan *et al.* 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Hallinger 2020; Kovaitè *et al.* 2022.

In these industries the sustainability issue needs ad hoc cultural policies, and typical and atypical fundraising and crowdfunding are included here<sup>27</sup>. Of course, intangible heritage can be the focus of specific policies<sup>28</sup>. Culture is meant as a driver, so that the whole society can support different meanings and goals of sustainability. Policies should recognise the magnitude and growth of culture as a driver of awareness and commitments<sup>29</sup>.

Sustainability commitment and management involves giving attention to measurements, and the literature about cultural and creative industries supplies different indicators, approaches, and impact assessments according to the advocacy of thematic indicators<sup>30</sup>. It is not only a matter of variables and their analysis but also of comparative approaches, reporting, and geographical boundaries, from urban to cross country ones<sup>31</sup>.

With a focus on sustainability in theatres, recent papers highlight management approaches and cultural policy support. The timing covers the pandemic and post-pandemic periods, an “era” of disruptive innovations that artists, art students, theatre employees, and boards had to adapt to<sup>32</sup>. From the analysis of this literature, a constant attention emerges to all four definitions of sustainability, to who are the “actors” of a theatrical system that assumes the responsibility of disseminating sustainable actions, practices, and strategies among theatres, cultural and creative organisations, value chains, stakeholders, communities, and social spheres much broader than communities. Economic sustainability, its measurement, and easy understanding are priorities for some stakeholders. Sustainability is a value that comes out of the theatre and permeates social relationships; it concerns inclusion and wellbeing, and relationships and the growth thereof. Environmental sustainability is measured and narrated in reports that can be mission reports, communicated to all those who are, or potentially could be, stakeholders. Sustainability storytelling is combined with reporting of the recovery and enhancement of tangible and intangible heritage, archives, memories of seasons, and artistic performances that are digital or at a stage of early digitisation. The heritages certainly constitute cultural sustainability.

In comparison to existing literature on sustainability in the cultural and creative industries more broadly, this review of theatre highlights the evolving

<sup>27</sup> Borin, Crepin 2022; Borin, Fantini 2023; Donato 2021; Donelli *et al.* 2022; Jelinčić, Šveb 2021; Pyykkönen 2024.

<sup>28</sup> Tan *et al.* 2020; Zhao *et al.* 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Lez, Ciprian 2020.

<sup>30</sup> UNESCO 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Borin *et al.* 2024; Bosi *et al.* 2022; Kraemer 2022; Montalto *et al.* 2022; Müller, Grieshaber 2024; Sedita *et al.* 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Aranyosy 2022; Besana *et al.* 2024; Brooks, Patel 2022; Caust 2021; Dragičević, Stefanović 2022; Labaronne, Leuschen 2021; Newton, Taylor 2020; Pérez 2023; Pulido *et al.* 2022; Zakopoulos *et al.* 2023.

roles of performing artists in fostering social cohesion and inclusion. It also illustrates how digital transformation has enabled the performing arts to cope with the pandemic. This promotes the digitisation and streaming of cultural heritage and increases diversification of funding.

| Topic  | Approach               | Year                   | Author                      |
|--|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Sustainability in cultural and creative industries | Tourism                | 2024                   | Ottaviani <i>et al.</i>     |
|  |                        | 2022                   | Meyer <i>et al.</i>         |
|  |                        | 2022                   | Sajib <i>et al.</i>         |
|  | Business management    | 2023                   | Lin                         |
|  |                        | 2021                   | Esposito and Vannini        |
|  | Regional studies       | 2023                   | Hongjia <i>et al.</i>       |
|  | Urban studies          | 2023                   | Ordóñez-Ponce               |
|  |                        | 2022                   | Naheed and Shooshtarian     |
|  |                        | 2021                   | Bertoni <i>et al.</i>       |
|  | Organisation studies   | 2022                   | Murillo-Aviña <i>et al.</i> |
|  | Literature review      | 2022                   | Kovaité <i>et al.</i>       |
|  |                        | 2020                   | Hallinger                   |
| Sociology  | 2021                   | Kanzola and Panagiotis |                             |
| Heritage studies                                   | 2020                   | Tan <i>et al.</i>      |                             |
| Sustainability and policy                          | Cultural policy        | 2024                   | Pyykkönen                   |
|  |                        | 2021                   | Donato                      |
|  |                        | 2020                   | Lez and Ciprian             |
|  | Crowdfunding           | 2023                   | Borin and Fantini           |
|  |                        | 2022                   | Borin and Crepin            |
|  |                        | 2021                   | Jelinčić and Šveb           |
|  |                        | 2022                   | Donelli <i>et al.</i>       |
|  | Intangible heritage    | 2022                   | Zhao <i>et al.</i>          |
| 2020   |                        | Tan <i>et al.</i>      |                             |
| Sustainability measurement                         | Benchmark analysis     | 2024                   | Müller and Grieshaber       |
|  | Regional economics     | 2022                   | Montalto <i>et al.</i>      |
|  | Reporting              | 2022                   | Bosi <i>et al.</i>          |
|  | Urban studies          | 2022                   | Kraemer                     |
|  | Cross-country analysis | 2022                   | Sedita <i>et al.</i>        |

|                            |   |      |  |
|----------------------------|---|------|--|
| Sustainability in theatres | Technology and innovation and inclusion | 2023 | Zakopoulos <i>et al.</i> ; Lee <i>et al.</i> |
|                            |   | 2022 | Aranyossy                                    |
|                            | Management and viability                | 2024 | Fristoe and Longacre                         |
|                            |   | 2023 | Pérez  |
|                            | Cultural policy                         | 2022 | Dragičević and Stefanović                    |
|                            | Literature review                       | 2022 | Brooks and Patel                             |
|                            | Management and resilience               | 2022 | Herrero and Kraemer; Pulido <i>et al.</i>    |
|                            | Management                              | 2021 | Labaronne and Leuschen                       |
|                            | Management                              | 2020 | Newton and Taylor                            |
|                            | Human resources and employability       | 2021 | Caust  |

Tab. 1. Literature review of sustainability: from cultural and creative industries to theatres (Source: own elaboration)

As will emerge from the analysis in this paper about theatres, the economic sustainability can be a priority and success or failure in social, cultural and environmental sustainability profit by the economic sustainability. As a matter of fact, economic sustainability is implicit in different sustainability and concerns the durability and legacy of an organisation, such as a firm. This will be a result of the here developed research.

Here, sustainability is directly linked to goals on the UN agenda, apart from any other approach that may investigate and deepen alternative sustainability indicators and measurements. Each of the 17 goals corresponds to a series of targets (for a total of 169 targets), which recall the environmental, social, and economic challenges that the world must face to move to a sustainable development model. In addition to addressing some environmental, social, and economic challenges such as climate change, education, poverty, and inequality, the goals emphasise essential missions and values such as justice, peace, and the importance of collaboration to achieve these goals. They belong to a framework in which each goal sits alongside the others, and the pursuit of one goal strengthens the achievement of all. Embraced by theatres, these goals will be tracked among the 17 and they will be commented on according to their engagement in different sustainability definitions.

Based on these premises, this study aims to explore how theatres are addressing the challenges of the four main dimensions of sustainability that emerged from the literature review: strategy and management, environmental sustainability, social and cultural sustainability, and economic sustainability. These themes form the basis of the following research questions, which aim to explore how theatres are addressing these multiple challenges:

- RQ1:* How can theatres integrate different concepts of sustainability into their management strategies to create a balance between artistic innovation and economic efficiency, ensuring long term success?
- RQ 2:* How can theatres reach economic, environmental, social, and cultural sustainability?

### 3. *Methodology*

To answer the two research questions, qualitative research was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews with managers of a sample of theatres in Milan. This research methodology was chosen to explore and deepen the four dimensions of sustainability and challenges. In fact, in combining flexibility and structure, semi-structured interviews make it possible to delve into specific themes while leaving space for the exploration of new perspectives<sup>33</sup>. This section goes into more detail on sample selection and data collection.

#### 3.1. *Sample*

Milan is a major European city, distinguished by its rich cultural heritage, historic theatres, and significant contribution to the performing arts. The city is home to some of Europe's most renowned theatres (e.g. Teatro alla Scala, Piccolo Teatro), along with vibrant contemporary theatre institutions creating a diverse cultural ecosystem. The city of Milan is renowned for its cultural heritage and theatres play a significant role in the preservation and evolution of the city's cultural identity. They are both platforms for creative expression and spaces for community engagement and, at the same time, embody artistic heritage. They are dynamic institutions that contribute to the sustainability, preservation, and evolution of cultural heritage. The significance of this cultural milieu is underscored by the city's role as a nexus for the study of sustainability, a field that intersects with the performing arts in myriad ways. The city's extensive cultural infrastructure renders it an ideal location for the study of the interaction between sustainability and artistic heritage, both historical and contemporary, as well as *avant-garde*. Furthermore, the geographical and economic position of Milan within Italy and Europe facilitates the exchange of international best practices, thus positioning the city as a central node in global conversations on cultural sustainability. In addition, it is useful to empha-

<sup>33</sup> Maxwell 2005.

sis that the researchers have experienced the cultural and theatrical reality of Milan, the city in which they are based.

These points provide a comprehensive rationale for the selection of Milan as the study's location.

To explore the topic, the present study examines five Milanese theatres – namely Franco Parenti, Elfo Puccini, Fontana, Carcano, and Menotti Filippo Perego – selected on the basis that they share key characteristics that render them particularly suitable for comparison. Each of the theatres is centrally located in Milan, operates on a mid-size scale, relies on a mix of public and private funding, maintains a robust year-round schedule, engages in in-house production, has actively undertaken sustainability initiatives, and offered the researchers easy access to theatre management thanks to established professional relationships within the researchers' own network. This confluence of features guarantees that the study can meaningfully compare the approaches of these theatres to programming, financing, community engagement, and environmental responsibility, while highlighting the nuances that arise within mid-level performing arts institutions in a major urban centre. Finally, it is worth clarifying the thinking behind the exclusion of the Piccolo Teatro di Milano. Although it is undoubtedly an important cultural institution in the city and is internationally recognised for its artistic contribution, its overall profile and operational structure are very different from those of the other theatres studied here. Founded as Italy's first municipal theatre and receiving substantial public funding, Piccolo Teatro has a size, administrative framework, and international reach that set it apart from most local theatres. Its inclusion would therefore have risked distorting the results by introducing variables – such as larger budgets, more extensive marketing capabilities, and a broader international network – not shared by the other institutions in the sample. Consequently, the exclusion of Piccolo Teatro ensures that the study remains focused on theatres that are more comparable in terms of size, funding models, and community engagement practices. It can therefore be said that the selected theatres for this study are of particular importance in the context of understanding sustainability in Milan. These theatres represent a variety of facets of the city's cultural and social landscape, each offering unique insights into the topic. Each institution contributes in its own way, providing practical examples and theoretical insights into sustainability strategies, highlighting the importance of theatres beyond entertainment, as dynamic platforms for social innovation, cultural preservation, and environmental awareness.

Here is a brief presentation of the institutions.

*Teatro Franco Parenti.* Teatro Franco Parenti, located in Milan's Porta Romana neighbourhood, is distinguished by its innovative approach to programming. The theatre actively seeks to push the boundaries of conventional theatrical forms through experimentation and interdisciplinary collaborations. By integrating different art forms and utilising unique spaces such as the Bagni

Misteriosi – a revitalised outdoor area with a pool and event space – the theatre offers audiences engaging cultural experiences. The theatre's mission is to challenge traditional theatrical conventions by promoting experimentation and interdisciplinary collaboration. The shows are socially relevant, encouraging critical thinking and dialogue within the community. Franco Parenti Theatre's vision is to act as a driving force for cultural and social transformation.

*Teatro Elfo Puccini.* This is situated in one of Milan's most important commercial areas, Corso Buenos Aires. Founded in the 1970s, the theatre is a place recognised for contemporary theatre and artistic experimentation. Its main mission is to produce and promote shows that confront contemporary societal issues and artistic trends, while providing support for emerging artists. Teatro Elfo Puccini envisions itself as a dynamic cultural centre that nurtures creativity and encourages dialogue between artists and the community with programmes that often reflect sustainability themes, raising awareness of environmental and societal issues through its performances.

*Teatro Fontana.* Located in Milan's Isola district, Teatro Fontana serves as a community-focus theatre that merges culture and inclusivity. The theatre's primary mission is to function as both a platform for emerging talent and a bridge between the arts and the surrounding community. By creating strong educational and participatory programmes, Teatro Fontana fosters cultural growth offering high quality performances and programmes for audiences of all ages, trying in particular to engage younger generations. The theatre envisions itself as a nurturing space for new talent, while also serving as a cultural bridge that connects diverse communities through the arts.

*Teatro Carcano.* Teatro Carcano, founded in 1803, is one of Milan's oldest theatres, positioned in the Porta Romana neighbourhood. The theatre is well suited to large scale productions that appeal to a diverse and wide audience. Over time, Teatro Carcano has become a significant cultural institution, blending its mission to preserve Italy's rich theatrical heritage with a commitment to embracing modern and contemporary artistic expressions. The theatre has undergone numerous renovations that have successfully modernised its infrastructure, incorporating energy efficient upgrades and waste reduction measures while preserving the architectural grandeur of the historic building. Teatro Carcano offers a diverse programming mix that includes drama, dance, and music to engage different audiences. This effort reflects its mission to present a wide repertoire ranging from classic plays to modern productions, appealing to both traditional theatre goers and new audiences. The theatre's vision is to establish itself as a prestigious cultural institution that simultaneously honours Italy's theatrical traditions and fosters innovation.

*Teatro Menotti Filippo Perego.* Teatro Menotti Filippo Perego, formerly known as Teatro Menotti, is situated in Milan's eastern residential area. The theatre prides itself on being a hub for innovative theatre, providing opportunities for both well established and emerging artists to showcase their work. Its pro-

gramming includes original works, contemporary adaptations, and *avant-garde* performances, all designed to engage audiences with modern themes and narratives. The theatre actively engages with the public through workshops, educational programmes, and interactive shows that not only entertain but also provoke thought and discussion on relevant social topics. Its vision is to become a leading venue for *avant-garde* theatre in Milan while also supporting new playwrights.

Table 2 summarises some of the characteristics of those Milanese Theatres, such as governance, the number of collaborators, turnover, the number of tickets sold, seating capacity, other activities not concerning performance, and sustainability initiatives.

### 3.2. Data collection

A qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured in-depth interviews between May and July 2024. Insights into five theatres were gained through the participation of eight individuals responsible for managerial activities. Interviews were conducted mostly via MS Teams, except for one that was carried out in person and one via email. This multi-method design was dependent on each respondent's availability. However, it did not affect the quality and reliability of the information collected<sup>34</sup>. Apart from the one conducted via email, interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The interview questions were structured to ensure they were relevant to the research topic<sup>35</sup>. Interviewers asked questions related to various issues, such as commitment to sustainability and governance (e.g. joining the UN 2030 Agenda), strategy (e.g. incorporating sustainability goals into missions and corporate culture), implementation of initiatives in the field of economic, environmental, social and cultural sustainability, and disclosure (e.g. reflecting on transparency in communication).

## 4. Findings

The analysis of the interviews is reported by focusing on four main themes: strategy and management, including implementation; environmental sustainability; social and cultural sustainability; and economic sustainability.

<sup>34</sup> See Lobe *et al.* 2022 for a systematic comparison of in person and video based online interviews.

<sup>35</sup> Denzin, Lincoln 2011.

| Theatre                       | Governance   | Collaborators (n., 2024)                                      | Turnover         | N. of Tickets Sold (Annually) | Seating Capacity (n.) | Activities Apart from Performances  | Sustainability Initiatives   |
|-------------------------------|--|---|------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|---|--|
| Teatro Fontana                | Managed by a mutual company  | 48 (full-time staff, seasonal collaborators)                  | 1,222,140 (2023) | ~ 50,000                      | 500                   | Cultural workshops, collaborations with local schools, exhibitions                            | Digitisation of historical archives; community memory initiatives integrating sustainability                     |
| Teatro Franco Parenti         | Privately managed, directed by an artistic board   | 147 (full-time staff, part-time, and freelance collaborators) | 3,203,449 (2023) | ~ 130,000                     | 1,000                 | Film screenings, art exhibitions, community events, outdoor summer activities                 | Revitalisation of historical spaces (Bagni Misteriosi); preservation of archives; innovative sustainable staging |
| Teatro Carcano                | Managed by a private company, directed by an artistic board                                  | 71 (full-time staff, additional seasonal staff)               | 3,180,126 (2023) | ~ 76,000                      | 1,500                 | Educational programmes, lectures, classical music concerts, cultural conferences              | Modernisation with energy-efficient upgrades; sustainable set design and heritage preservation                   |
| Teatro Menotti Filippo Peregò | Managed by a private organisation with a strong focus on contemporary and innovative theatre | 46 (full-time staff, freelance artists)                       | 953,358 (2022)   | ~ 40,000                      | 300                   | Art installations, small scale festivals, artist residencies, community engagement activities | Community engagement; educational programmes on sustainability; support contemporary playwrights                 |
| Teatro Elfo                   | Managed by a private organisation with an emphasis on contemporary productions               | 124 (full-time staff, freelance artists)                      | 1,804,717 (2023) | ~ 70,000                      | 750                   | Workshops, contemporary art exhibitions, experimental theatre labs, community engagement      | Digitisation of archives; sustainable contemporary productions; performances raising sustainability awareness    |

Tab. 2. Sampled Milanese theatres and their characteristics (Source: own elaboration from Ufficio Camerale and interviews)

#### 4.1. *Strategy and management*

With respect to the topic of strategy and management, a strong awareness emerged of the importance of both integrating sustainability into day-to-day management and of a long-term vision. Moreover, in terms of their mission and relationship with sustainability, theatres can be divided into two types. The first includes those theatres that view sustainability as an integral part of their mission even when this is not explicit, influencing artistic choices and operational practices; it is an «innate sensitivity» (KI 5) in the words of one interviewee. For the second cluster of theatres, sustainability is seen as a facilitator of the mission («our mission is another one, that is making art. However, sustainability improves the way we make art» KI 1) or as an external request integrated into the theatre's planning.

In any case, all theatres are very aware that they have a socially, culturally, and environmentally strong impact («we believe that theatre can be an engine for positive change», KI 4), even if implementation is different among theatres and often lacks a systematic and structured approach, according to the interviewees. For example, apart from in two theatres, staff training actions for good dissemination practices are not developed. In the others, «staff grow in skills» (KI 1) through training courses on other correlated subjects or through «a natural culture inherent» (KI 3) in those involved in theatre. Furthermore, with just a few exceptions, there is hardly ever a sustainability manager in the sampled theatres.

With respect to the UN goals, although no theatre among the respondents formally adhered to the 2030 Agenda, partly for reasons of statutory impossibility, many of their goals are aligned with the SDGs, particularly those related to education, gender equality, clean energy, and reducing inequality.

Regarding communication, the results of the interviews show a growing awareness of the importance of communicating sustainability actions and making the results transparent. Although the Social Report is compulsory for many of the interviewed theatres, to date only one theatre has published a Social Report outside the Single Register of the Third Sector and others will do so in the short term for the first time for «clarity and transparency» (KI 2). With respect to a sustainability report, three theatres stated that they are in the process of publishing one for the first time. In addition to reporting tools, many theatres communicate their sustainability initiatives through their website, social media, and newsletters. Some of the sampled theatres are already working to implement a website section entirely dedicated to sustainability, with data, information, and other things; for example, one theatre will include educational resources for external audiences. One theatre said that it uses media relations to communicate its sustainable actions too.

The last two management related points are certifications and the budget. With respect to the former, only one theatre declared that it is «exploring the

possibility of obtaining sustainability certifications from recognised bodies to not only strengthen our credibility, but also to have a clear framework for our sustainable practices and goals» (KI 4). With respect to budget, half of the theatres said they have one to implement sustainable actions. Almost all also rely heavily on fundraising through public tenders or corporate sponsorship.

#### 4.2. *Environmental sustainability*

The second theme concerned environmental sustainability. Three main aspects related to this emerged from the interviews: environmental sustainability of the building(s) housing the theatre; production of environmentally sustainable performances; and promotion of environmentally sustainable behaviour through the themes staged by certain performances.

As regards the sustainability of theatre buildings, the interviewed theatres are all investing in renovations that incorporate environmentally friendly technologies and materials, such as the use of renewable energy and thermal insulation. They are also taking measures for efficient resource management – for example, by installing efficient systems and using renewable sources to reduce water and energy consumption and implementing waste separation and recycling.

The latter theme is linked to that of set design and thus to production: all theatres favour recycled and reusable materials for set design, thus reducing waste production and environmental impact. According to one interviewee, «recycling is in theatre's DNA. We have trained ourselves on the practice of retaining the repertoire. We never throw anything» (KI 1). But it is not just a matter of repertoire, as another interviewee considers it, in fact, to be a question of design: «the sets are designed to be modular and reusable, allowing them to be adapted and reworked for different performances. This flexibility reduces the need to build new sets from scratch for each production, lowering costs and the associated environmental impact» (KI 4).

On this topic, one of the sampled theatres is joining a call for a pilot project called *AI-MUSE (Artificial Intelligence tool for MUseums, theatreS, and the audiovisual sEctor)*, promoted by Quality Culture, an organisation working in the field of digital innovation in EU-funded projects. The project aims to develop an app powered by artificial intelligence that would revolutionise set design, making it more sustainable in terms of the use of materials and time, and therefore more economical. The project was presented in April 2024 as part of Creative Europe's CROSS SECTORAL programme but was not funded.

Still with production, other actions concern: the replacement of current with more efficient equipment; the digitisation of certain processes such as the dematerialisation of tickets; and collaboration with eco-friendly suppliers.

Environmental sustainability is also a matter to be disseminated through performances. Some theatres stated that they offer some themed shows to raise awareness among the public. According to one interviewee, it is mainly young people who are the producers of these shows and the most interested audience too.

All the theatres stated that the process of implementing environmentally sustainable actions takes place as a long-term conscious choice and in all the actions that make this implementation possible («where we can tend to», KI 6).

#### 4.3. *Social and cultural sustainability*

«Theatre is a social place, it is a community that puts the individual at the centre» (KI 7), one interviewee declared. And indeed, the results of the interviews presented theatres as catalysts for social change and meeting places for diverse communities, thanks to a series of initiatives and collaborations aimed at inclusion, participation, collaboration, and social commitment.

With regard to inclusion, theatres try to be accessible to all thanks to specific services for people with hearing and visual impairments (e.g. the *SentiAMOci* project for hearing impairments, to which more than one theatre has signed up), and to create projects dedicated to marginalised groups such as the elderly, people with mental disabilities, and young people from difficult backgrounds. Actions aimed at making performances accessible to all include the use of subtitles, the provision of ramps, and the offer of tickets at reduced prices. One interesting initiative is that of a theatre that allows people with visual impairments to perform a ritual before the performance: «the group of blind spectators must meet the actors. They must touch them, they must touch the material with which they are dressed, they must touch their face, and they must hear their voice to grasp all the aspects that will then be narrated by an operator who does not tell them the plot» (KI 1). Another interesting initiative concerns the artists' disability: one theatre is a partner of EBA, the Italian Network of Europe Beyond Access, which aims to promote the participation of artists with disabilities and to increase the visibility of their works.

Participation concerns the theatre community, which is involved through workshops, meetings, and debates in order to dialogue and participate in the life of the theatre. Collaboration is part of the broader framework of partnerships with different territory actors such as schools, associations, and both public and private bodies, to multiply the impact of their actions and create a support network. Together, these two objectives are one of the pillars that all the theatres have described with respect to their relationship with their "area" of Milan. Except for one theatre, in fact, the others in referring to their community have always talked about the geographical area in which they are

based and in which they feel they are community actors. To achieve these objectives, sometimes the theatre goes outside its own walls and its own main activity, e.g. with the creation of a garden outside the theatre.

A final objective is that of social commitment, which sometimes becomes almost brand activism: theatres act as spokespersons for important issues such as human rights and social inclusion through performances, conferences, and debates, stimulating reflection and promoting change.

On cultural sustainability, two main themes emerged: memory and identity, and archive. Memory and identity are themes upon which the theatres interviewed have often dwelt, especially in reference to their local community. With respect to this theme, one project is that of the *Keepers of Memory*, which is based on a collection of video interviews with the oldest people in the neighbourhood, who have seen the changes «transforming them into a precious collective heritage» (KI 7) that is staged. The theatre thus becomes a place for preserving and enhancing local history, fostering exchange between generations and strengthening the sense of belonging to the community.

Finally, the interviewees highlighted a challenge common to many theatres: the management and valorisation of archives, a heritage of paper materials, costumes, sets, and recordings documenting decades of activity. The main difficulties concern: the lack of adequate space for archiving; the preservation of delicate materials such as costumes and sets, which requires specific skills and economic resources; the digitisation process, which, although fundamental for the preservation and dissemination of materials, is long and complex and has not yet been tackled by all the theatres interviewed; the valorisation of materials, which must be made accessible to, and usable by, the public once digitised. In all the sampled theatres the archive is in fact not open to the public; only on some occasions does it open on request, for example for academic research. The process of making the archive more than just a repository of materials and into a source of knowledge and collective memory for theatres and the community is therefore still ongoing. In this vision, sustainability is the ability to last over time, to keep the cultural heritage alive and to pass it on to future generations: «durability is the deep feeling of sustainability» (KI 5), said one interviewee.

#### 4.4. *Economic sustainability*

With respect to economic sustainability, it permeated many of the arguments concerning other types of sustainability: theatres should always be seen, and see themselves, as companies that must be economically sustainable – hence the importance of a management approach that goes beyond covering costs and becomes an element in ensuring the long term survival of the theatre and in realising projects. Among the strategies used, one of the most import-

ant is fundraising: for example, some theatres rely on consultancy structures dedicated to fundraising, which allows them to access resources from private individuals, public bodies, and foundations. On the one hand, some theatres focus more on partnerships with the public sector or participation in calls for tenders; on the other hand, others focus more on companies' partnerships. It is also mentioned that reusing resources such as sets and costumes helps in achieving economic sustainability through saving.

Finally, many of the sampled theatres use ancillary services to obtain revenue from the theatre (e.g. a bar and a bistro) or spaces that can be used for very different targets with different needs from cultural ones (e.g. one theatre has a swimming pool under management) «because the theatre with tickets does not pay for things» (KI 5).

## 5. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the integration of sustainability in theatre management, focusing on Italian theatres. The findings reveal that sustainability in theatres is not simply a peripheral concern but is increasingly becoming a central aspect of strategic planning and daily operations.

To answer the first research question regarding the integration of sustainability into strategy and management, the interviews indicate an increasing awareness among theatre managers of the importance of embedding sustainability into both strategic and operational levels. This aligns with Elkington's concept of the Triple Bottom Line, which emphasises the need for organisations to balance environmental, social, and economic objectives. Theatres that view sustainability as a part of their mission demonstrate a more holistic approach, integrating sustainable practices into artistic choices and operational procedures. This reflects Schumacher's advocacy of context-appropriate technologies and governance structures that prioritise sustainability at a fundamental level. However, the lack of a systematic and structured approach to implementing sustainability suggests there is a gap between awareness and action. The absence of dedicated sustainability managers and formal staff training programmes highlights potential challenges in operationalising sustainability goals. This finding confirms the literature that emphasises the need for organisational commitment and capacity building to achieve sustainable development objectives. The limited formal alignment with the United Nations 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) further stresses this gap. While theatres are engaging in activities that support specific SDGs, formal adoption and reporting remain minimal.

As for the second research question and the four dimensions of sustainability, as far as environmental sustainability practices are concerned, theatres are

committed to enhancing environmental sustainability by renovating buildings using eco-friendly technologies, managing resources efficiently, and incorporating sustainable materials into set design. These actions focus on resource efficiency and reducing waste. The innovative use of artificial intelligence in set design, as seen in the AI-MUSE project, exemplifies how technology can facilitate sustainable practices. Moreover, the inclusion of environmental themes in performances highlights the role of theatres as platforms for raising public awareness and advocating environmental issues. This supports the notion that cultural institutions can influence societal values and behaviours aimed at sustainability.

In terms of social and cultural sustainability, theatres seem to serve as catalysts for social change, promoting inclusion, participation, and social commitment. Initiatives targeting marginalised groups and enhancing accessibility demonstrate a commitment to social sustainability, resonating with the People aspect of the Triple Bottom Line. The preservation and valorisation of cultural heritage through projects like *Keepers of Memory* emphasise the role of theatres in fostering cultural sustainability. By acting as custodians of collective memory and identity, theatres contribute to the regeneration and promotion of cultural values. However, challenges in managing and digitising archives highlight the need for resources and expertise to preserve cultural heritage effectively.

In regard to economic sustainability and its interconnection with other dimensions, in our study, economic sustainability emerges as a foundational aspect that supports environmental, social, and cultural sustainability efforts. Theatres managers recognise the necessity of being economically viable to sustain their operations and implement sustainable initiatives. Fundraising, partnerships, and ancillary services are strategic approaches employed by them to enhance economic sustainability. The reliance on diverse revenue streams underscores the importance of innovative business models and accountability in achieving long-term viability. The reuse of resources, such as sets and costumes, not only contributes to economic efficiency but also aligns with environmental sustainability goals. This integration demonstrates how economic considerations can drive sustainable practices, supporting the notion that economic sustainability can be a predictor and facilitator of other sustainability dimensions. In Figure 1, the pivotal role of economic sustainability is emphasised by being the beginning of a process that is called “building sustainability”. This process includes environmental, social, and cultural elements, all of them matched and achieved by strategic management, which integrates sustainability in everyday activities and every stakeholder’s awareness.

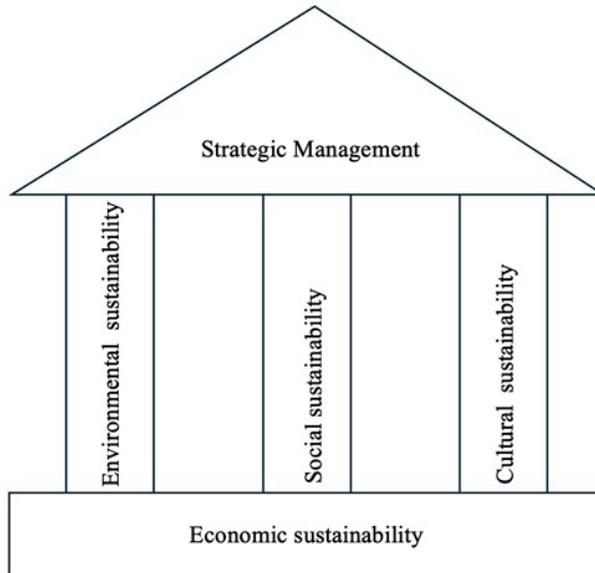


Fig. 1. Building sustainability in Milanese Theatres (Source: own elaboration)

In managers' opinions, economic sustainability serves as the base upon which the entire sustainability process rests. Without a solid financial foundation, it is difficult for any organisation to pursue broader sustainability goals effectively. In essence, sound economic management ensures that resources are available for investment in environmental, social, and cultural initiatives. Organisations with economic stability are better positioned to invest in green technologies, renewable energy sources, and sustainable production methods that mitigate environmental impact and offer at the same time the ability to implement positive social policies and contribute to societal wellbeing.

As illustrated in Figure 1, economic sustainability plays a pivotal role in the broader sustainability framework of the theatres examined in this study. This model illustrates how Milanese theatres first ensure robust financial health to effectively engage in broader sustainability practices. The concept of economic sustainability is depicted not merely as an additional dimension but as a foundational layer on which all other dimensions – environmental, social, and cultural – are built.

An examination of the theatres in the sample could confirm that economic sustainability serves as a foundational element, facilitating financial viability through diverse revenue streams, encompassing public funding, private sponsorship, and ancillary activities. This would enable broader sustainability investments. The environmental, social, and cultural elements demonstrate the different but complementary approaches adopted by these theatres. For instance, the theatres of Teatro Carcano and Franco Parenti emphasise the sus-

tainability of infrastructure, while Elfo Puccini and Menotti Perego prioritise socially engaged programming and innovative productions.

Figure 1 also underscores the role of strategic management in the process of “building sustainability”. Strategic management is depicted as the overarching element integrating these elements, emphasising how structured managerial approaches can facilitate the effective embedding of sustainability within day-to-day operations and long-term strategic planning. Strategic management is the enabler of the process, and this means that business decisions must consider not only profitability but also the broader impact on stakeholders – employees, suppliers, local communities, and the environment. Strategic management focuses on balancing these different dimensions, ensuring that sustainability becomes embedded in both the products and services offered and the company’s long-term strategy and corporate culture.

Furthermore, the strategic utilisation of theatre heritage must be given due consideration. This concept can be delineated as the deliberate and purposeful management, leveraging, and integration of historical venues, performance traditions, archival materials, costumes, set designs, scripts, and other forms of intangible heritage. By activating these multifaceted resources, theatre organisations aim to address contemporary sustainability objectives, foster deeper community engagement, and strengthen cultural, social, economic, and environmental resilience. Through this holistic approach, heritage elements are not merely conserved but actively utilised to ensure the long-term viability and relevance of theatre institutions in an ever-evolving societal context.

The use of heritage theatres and archival resources by theatres can contribute to economic sustainability by enhancing tourism and diversifying income streams. This can be achieved through activities such as the rental of historic spaces, the organisation of events, and the production of specialised heritage merchandise, as exemplified by the revitalisation of the historic Bagni Misteriosi by Teatro Franco Parenti. In terms of social and cultural sustainability, theatre heritage can strengthen community identity and intergenerational bonds, as seen in Teatro Fontana’s *Keepers of Memory*, where local history is preserved and brought to life onstage to strengthen social cohesion. The adoption of production practices rooted in traditional methods of reuse and recycling, as well as through energy efficient renovations, can address environmental sustainability. This is illustrated by Teatro Carcano’s integration of eco-friendly upgrades into historic venue restorations. Furthermore, heritage can serve as a critical educational resource for raising awareness of sustainability and cultural continuity, as demonstrated by Teatro Menotti Filippo Perego’s workshops that meld the study of heritage with contemporary sustainability issues. Community engagement and participatory heritage initiatives, exemplified by Teatro Elfo Puccini’s invitation to residents to help digitise archives, further empower individuals, broaden accessibility, and reinforce collective cultural memory. The use of digital tools and strategic digitisation in theatre heritage

management is an increasingly valuable aspect of this field, enabling institutions to preserve scripts, costumes, recordings, and documents while reducing physical storage demands and reaching wider audiences. These strategies offer significant benefits ranging from enhanced community resilience through deeper cultural identity to increased economic viability via diversified revenue sources, to minimising environmental impacts through resource efficient practices, and to strengthened stakeholder engagement through collaborative action on sustainability. Consequently, integrating theatre heritage into management practices can assist theatres in achieving comprehensive sustainability goals, thereby ensuring the continuity of cultural legacies while concurrently nurturing economic stability, social cohesion, and responsible environmental stewardship.

This holistic framework highlights the potential for each theatre – despite differences in size, governance, or programming – to advance their sustainability efforts, emphasising their collective role in societal transformation through culture and community engagement and offering practical insights for future improvements in sustainability management across the performing arts sector.

The above confirms that the overall process of building sustainability is facilitated by strategic management, which incorporates the principles of economic, environmental, social, and cultural sustainability into daily operations. This means that business decisions must consider not only profitability but also the broader impact on stakeholders – employees, suppliers, local communities, and the environment. Strategic management focuses on balancing these different dimensions, ensuring that sustainability becomes embedded in both the products and services offered and the company's long-term strategy and corporate culture.

While managers in the theatres studied often regard economic sustainability as the foundational layer upon which environmental, social, and cultural efforts are built, recent scholarship suggests a more integrated and non-hierarchical approach to sustainability. This emerging perspective challenges the primacy of the economy, proposing instead that economic sustainability, though still essential, must be understood as part of a complex and dynamic system of interrelated elements. In this view, economic, environmental, social, and cultural dimensions are equally critical and operate in continuous interaction, requiring compromises and synergies rather than linear prioritisation.

In the context of theatre institutions, this integrated systemic approach is particularly relevant. As the case studies demonstrate, theatres are not merely economic entities but also vital cultural, social, and ecological actors. Their ability to foster social cohesion, cultural regeneration, and ecological awareness becomes more evident when they adopt non-growth-oriented models and embed sustainability across all facets of their operations. Theatres such as Elfo Puccini and Menotti Peregò illustrate how socially engaged programming and inclusive participatory practices contribute to sustainability goals beyond

financial metrics, while venues like Teatro Carcano show how environmental concerns can be addressed through green renovations of historic spaces.

Figure 1, therefore, while depicting economic sustainability as the foundational layer, should also be understood in the context of strategic management that does not reinforce hierarchy but enables integration. Strategic management facilitates the orchestration of diverse resources, including heritage assets, towards a balanced model of sustainability. It ensures that each element – economic, environmental, social, and cultural – is both supported and supports the others. Through this lens, the economic dimension becomes not the sole enabler but one of several mutually reinforcing elements within a holistic sustainability strategy.

The examination of Milanese theatres illustrates the critical role of economic sustainability in enabling broader environmental, social, and cultural initiatives. From a managerial standpoint, financial health remains essential for stability, operational continuity, and strategic investment. However, an emerging body of research and practice invites a rethinking of sustainability beyond growth-oriented paradigms. In this view, aligned with degrowth principles<sup>36</sup>, the goal is not perpetual expansion but rather a deliberate, balanced approach that prioritises community wellbeing, ecological responsibility, and cultural richness.

Theatres, as socially embedded cultural institutions, are well suited to act as laboratories for such post growth thinking. By shifting focus from economic scaling to qualitative development – such as deepening audience engagement, preserving heritage, fostering inclusion, and reducing environmental impact – they can embody a form of sustainability that is both regenerative and resilient. Adopting degrowth informed models means reimagining success not in terms of ticket sales or constant programming expansion, but in the institution's ability to contribute meaningfully to societal transformation, cultural continuity, and ecological awareness

## 6. *Implications for theatre management and policy*

Sustainability in theatres offers multifaceted policy insights that extend beyond the performing arts and into the broader domains of economic development and environmental regulation. First, theatres can serve as *living labs* for experimenting with greener technologies, from low energy LED lighting and environmentally safe set materials to building retrofits that conserve water and improve insulation. Collecting data on cost savings, carbon reductions, and

<sup>36</sup> Brossmann, Islar 2020; Esposito, Vannini 2021; Islar *et al.* 2024.

audience satisfaction allows policymakers to obtain evidence of which sustainability measures deliver the greatest return on investment. These metrics can drive targeted financial incentives – such as grants, low interest loans, or tax rebates – to encourage sector wide adoption of effective eco-friendly practices. Second, due to their symbolic status and public visibility, theatres can shape cultural norms around sustainability. Policymakers can leverage this influence by integrating sustainability criteria into cultural funding schemes, emphasising the dual role of theatres as creative hubs and community educators. For example, awarding higher tiers of funding to institutions that meet explicit benchmarks – like renewable energy use or transparent reporting of carbon footprints – creates a clear framework that aligns cultural policies with municipal, regional, or national sustainability goals. Such an approach not only rewards theatres for measurable environmental achievements but also signals to audiences and adjacent sectors that the government is committed to fostering a greener cultural ecosystem. Third, the direct engagement of theatres with local communities – through outreach programmes, workshops, or participatory art experiences – can inform policy in areas such as civic engagement, social equity, and environmental justice. Documenting how different demographics perceive and benefit from green initiatives equips policymakers with nuanced insights into public reception and potential barriers to participation. These findings can shape more inclusive policy measures, ensuring that sustainability efforts do not inadvertently marginalise vulnerable groups. Moreover, partnering with grassroots organisations amplifies local voices, lending credibility and responsiveness to policy interventions. Finally, because theatres frequently operate in historically significant buildings or architecturally unique spaces, sustainability in these venues provides lessons on preserving cultural heritage while pioneering green innovations.

Sustainable theatre practices offer policymakers a robust, evidence-based toolkit for shaping legislation, funding programmes, and community engagement strategies. Recognising theatres as catalysts for environmental awareness and cultural innovation enables a holistic vision of sustainable development – one that balances financial viability, ecological stewardship, and social equity. From one perspective, theatre managers should formalise sustainability strategies and reporting practices, create dedicated roles, and strengthen staff training to ensure that environmental aspirations translate into tangible outcomes. From another perspective, policymakers and funding bodies can support these ambitions by providing resources and incentives – such as targeted grants, tax rebates, or accreditation programmes – to bolster the capacity of theatres to implement sustainability initiatives. Through these combined efforts, theatres can thrive as both creative institutions and environmental stewards, ultimately helping to cultivate a more resilient and sustainable future for the performing arts – and for society.

## 7. *Limitations and future research*

This study has some limitations: it remains an analysis on the supply side of the theatre market for best practices, which are developed by the interviewed managers, and does not involve audiences. Furthermore, it only considers the theatres that are based in a single city and in limited numbers. Considering the findings of this study, several paths for future research emerge that could significantly deepen the academic understanding of sustainability in theatre management and its broader implications for the cultural sector. First, it could be interesting to include theatres from different countries to gain comparative insights into the global implementation of sustainability practices and to highlight best practices. In addition, it could be useful to investigate audience perceptions of sustainability within the theatre context to help managers tailor their programming and communication. This could allow theatres to better meet audience expectations and enhance support for sustainability initiatives.

Metrics of sustainability must be integrated with standards of accounting and accountability of financial reporting, so that virtuous connections and benchmarks can be made available to stakeholders, who look for disclosure of best practices. Theatres may represent a significant benchmark for any other entertainment business, as they represent the core business of performing arts. The very next research will investigate reporting of national and international theatres, when accountability is focused on connections among different metrics: from accounting rows and ratios to sustainability indicators.

## 8. *Conclusion*

Sustainability in theatre management is not only a trend but a necessary evolution in response to global challenges and societal expectations. Theatres, as cultural institutions, have a unique role in shaping values, influencing behaviours, and contributing to sustainable development. By embracing sustainability, theatres can enhance their relevance, ensure their longevity, and make meaningful contributions to society and the environment.

Sustainability in the performing arts sector should be approached not as a linear hierarchy with the economy at its base, but as an integrated, dynamic system. Strategic management plays a crucial role in enabling this shift – coordinating resources, values, and practices across all sustainability dimensions. In doing so, theatre organisations can not only survive but thrive, offering a compelling example of how cultural institutions can lead the way toward more sustainable, equitable, and post growth futures.

The above suggests that the journey towards sustainability is complex and requires concerted efforts from theatre managers, policymakers, artists, and

communities. While challenges such as resource constraints, knowledge gaps, and balancing artistic freedom with sustainability objectives exist, the potential benefits are substantial. These benefits include cultural enrichment, social cohesion, environmental preservation, and economic resilience. By adopting a strategic approach, investing in capacity building, and engaging with stakeholders at all levels, theatres can overcome these challenges. Integrating sustainability into theatre management not only enhances the institution's operational effectiveness but also increases its social and cultural impact. Theatres can become models beyond the cultural and creative industries, leading the way towards a more sustainable future.

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