



# 'Constructive juxtaposition' as a policy assemblage method: Towards an understanding of the European Union's heritage initiatives and the making of 'European city' ideals

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## ABSTRACT

The policy assemblage approaches offer productive ways to understand how actors, institutions, and discourses interact to steer policies in different directions and produce new meanings and relations in society. However, they are disadvantaged by the lack of productive methodologies. This study addresses this gap by introducing the method of 'constructive juxtaposition' and engaging with an interdisciplinary approach to studying policy assemblages. This method facilitates a critical engagement in a single study, with, on the one hand, intended or unintended outcomes of policies or related instruments and, on the other hand, the understanding of the ways in which those outcomes are (re)produced in interplays between actors, institutions, and discourses in given contexts. The method of 'constructive juxtaposition' brings these two, often separate, research agendas into a productive dialogue. Building on the approaches and techniques of 'studying through' or 'following' policies, this method is based on the assumption that researching and exploring both sides of juxtaposition simultaneously bring a more comprehensive understanding of policy assemblages. By applying this method, this paper demonstrates how 'European city' ideals are produced in the interplay between actors, institutions, and discourses in the processes of implementation of the European Union's initiatives for designating common European heritage.

## 1. Introduction

In 2019–20, I researched the European Union's (EU) initiatives for designating 'common European heritage' and the ways they were implemented in EU member states (Aceska & Mitroi, 2021). We interviewed heritage experts to understand their daily practices and decision-making strategies in the processes of designating heritage sites as 'European'. The ways these heritage professionals talked about their work inspired me to write this paper – I was puzzled by how devoted they were to their missions, and yet at the same time, how unaware they were of the consequences of their decisions. Every heritage professional who was interviewed cared about their work, believed in European heritage, and felt they were contributing to the making of new senses of togetherness across the EU. However, despite their utter devotion and good intentions, these heritage professionals had no means to understand how their decisions affected people and places across the EU. They believed that heritage brings people and places together; yet, in practice, the heritage they were producing created the opposite effects: it contributed to the making of official identity narratives of the EU that divide people

and places. In this paper, I unpack aspects of the interplay between these heritage actors, the institutions they work for, the heritage initiatives they implement, and the discourses on heritage they operate with, to understand part of the reasons why the outcome of the processes of designating heritage as European contradicts the stated missions of the EU heritage agendas.

Throughout the past few decades, Europe became a 'memoryland' (Macdonald, 2013), a place in which heritage policy is made by a wide, continually increasing range of state and non-state, local, and international organisations. The EU cultural heritage agendas include numerous initiatives aimed at the making of what the EU's policy rhetoric calls 'common European heritage', such as the European Heritage Label, the European Heritage Days, and the European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage, among others, accompanied by initiatives that are directly associated with cities, such as the European Capitals of Culture and the city twinning initiatives. These initiatives have been part of the EU's efforts since the 1980s and their aim is to appeal to people's sense of belonging to the union and to construct a European identity, often referred to as singular (Calligaro, 2013; Delanty, 2018; Shore, 2000).

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The many new narratives about identity, history, and land produced by the EU's heritage policies and initiatives have affected not only senses of identity and belonging among the EU citizens but also cities and processes of urban change across the EU and beyond.

In this paper, I study the ways in which ideals about cities are produced in the bureaucratic processes of designating heritage as 'European' within the EU's initiatives for common European heritage. The focus is on the European Heritage Label (EHL), the EU's most illustrative initiative for common European heritage. The EHL initiative aims to promote identification of the EU's citizens, particularly the youth, with the EU by constructing what the EHL rhetoric calls the 'European significance' of heritage. The EHL sites are not awarded for their architectural quality, aesthetics, or universal values, but for their role in the history of Europe and the making of the European Union (see [European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2011](#)). The plaques of the EHL, carrying the colours and the symbols of the EU and a grand announcement 'Europe starts here!' are placed in front of city landmarks in many cities in the EU. A short narrative is engraved on the plaques that tells an effective and celebratory story about the role of that heritage site in the making of the EU. EHL is part of a series of initiatives with the same goal and represents what can be called the 'EU-isation of heritage' – the EU's understanding of heritage as a tool for advancing the project of European integration and for the making of European culture and identity ([Calligaro, 2013](#); [Lähdesmäki, 2016](#); [Lähdesmäki et al., 2019](#); [Niklasson, 2017](#); [Sassatelli, 2002](#); [Vos, 2017](#)).

The EU presents EHL and its cultural policies and initiatives for 'common European heritage' as rational and efficient tools customized for a single aim – to designate heritage as 'European' and create senses of shared European identity. Yet, as this paper demonstrates below, along the way the EHL's bureaucratic machinery steers heritage towards cities and (re)produces points of reference for what can be defined as 'European city' ideals – values a city should have, or aspire to achieve, to uphold the merits of and provide the cultural roots for the EU. City ideals are principles, ideas, or standards that reduce cities and places to one-dimensional images which are used by policy actors and urban professionals to justify models of planning and governing cities. Heritage comes with narratives about belonging, identity, and land which are promoted by city tourism industries and spread in professional and popular media, and more importantly, influence cities and strategies of city governance. Thus, the making of heritage-based city ideals must be observed in relation to the making of heritage narratives. As [Cole et al. \(2022\)](#) write, 'current urban narratives are largely made to contribute to the strategic positioning of cities within the worldwide competition between places' (p. 1). Over the past decades, studies have unpacked the ways different 'European city' ideals have served as validations and justifications for major urban reconstruction projects, such as in Dublin and Barcelona, for example, where 'European city' ideals were used for defending economic and neoliberal agendas of policy-makers and urban planners ([Lawton & Punch, 2014](#); [Monclús, 2003](#)), or in Berlin and Skopje, where different 'European city' ideals they served as justifications to erase socialist architecture ([Matoli, 2014](#); [Molnar, 2010](#)). The scholarship until now has analysed the ways in which different 'European city' ideals have been simultaneously produced and implemented in the everyday practices of planners and architects ([Lawton & Punch, 2014](#); [Molnar, 2010](#); [Monclús, 2003](#)) – yet the role of heritage policies in the making of 'European city' ideals has not received much scholarly attention.

To demonstrate how the EHL 'works' as an instrument for making 'European city' ideals, this study analyses the interplay between actors, institutions, and discourses in the processes of designating heritage as 'European' within the EHL initiative. The theoretical rationales are based on critical discourses on heritage, anthropological approaches to studying policy, and insights from policy assemblage thinking. [McCann and Ward \(2012a,b\)](#) invited researchers to trace and map 'the origins and spread of stories about places/policies in the professional and popular media' (2012a: 48) and to understand the processes of 'making

mobile of certain places as referential components of particular models' (2012b, 329). Inspired by their work, in this paper, I introduce the method of 'constructive juxtaposition' to unpack the ways in which heritage-based narratives about places and cities are produced in the processes of implementation of EU heritage policies and initiatives. These narratives have contributed to the making of 'European city' ideals, which, as this paper illustrates through several examples, have contributed to creating collective identity narratives about cities and justifying models of urban reconstruction. Thus, the main question in this paper is two-fold: first, in what ways heritage policies and initiatives lay grounds for the making of city ideals, and second, how these ideals are (re)produced in the interplay between actors, institutions, and discourses in the processes of designating heritage as 'European' within EU's heritage policies and initiatives.

## 2. Heritage, policy, and the making of city ideals: theoretical rationales

Cities are not only locations for heritage sites; rather, they shape and are shaped by heritage and heritage policies. Heritage is the basis for constructing narratives for collective local identities of cities that unfold not only in areas of city branding and marketing but also in processes of urban governance ([Cole et al., 2022](#); [Oosterlynck et al., 2019](#)). These narratives play a fundamental role in the ways in which city governments claim local and international political authority ([Ljungkvist, 2016](#); [Macdonald, 2009](#)) and unfold in processes of urban planning ([Graham et al., 2000: 209](#); [Ljungkvist, 2016](#); [Macdonald, 2009](#); [Wang & Gu, 2020](#)). By promoting heritage as 'inherently good' ([Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006: 190](#)), heritage narratives also shape peoples' morals about what it means to be a (good) city dweller; they generate new social solidarities among city dwellers ([Gospodini, 2004](#)) and produce values that help in overcoming ethnic and national boundaries in cities ([Martinović & Ifko, 2018](#)).

Understanding the ways in which heritage policies and initiatives steer heritage towards sites and the making of narratives about cities deserves scholarly attention. The EU has no political legitimacy to decide which cities, heritage sites, or heritage narratives can be designated as 'European' ([Sassatelli, 2002](#); [Shore, 2000](#)); rather, it governs the processes of designating heritage by introducing competitive heritage initiatives, often in the form of labels and awards. To understand how these ideals are produced in the processes of implementing these initiatives, in this study I cross-fertilise critical debates produced in several fields of study: critical debates on heritage making, on the one hand, and policy assemblage thinking and anthropological approaches to policy, on the other.

The critical debates on heritage-making are based on the idea that heritage is not given, but is produced in hegemonic bureaucratic machinery ([Smith, 2006](#)). [Bendix et al. \(2013\)](#) coined the term 'heritage regime' to capture the interplay of policies, practices, and ideologies between national and international heritage institutions in the processes of heritage-making. The EU heritage initiatives are produced and implemented in 'heritage regimes' – in the interplay between the EU and its member states' heritage sectors, as the main bodies responsible for the implementation of the EU's heritage policies and initiatives. A central part of any heritage regime is the hegemonic bureaucratic machinery that produces and maintains hegemonic discourse on heritage ([Smith, 2006](#)). Conceptualising heritage as a 'regime' makes the bureaucratic machinery deployed to designate heritage as 'European' more tangible ([Geismar, 2015](#)), and demonstrates how heritage is shaped by and shapes the making of scales, such as urban, regional, European, international, among the rest ([Lähdesmäki et al., 2019](#)).

The policy assemblage discourses and the anthropological perspectives on policies give a useful perspective to understand how heritage regimes 'work'. Policy assemblage refers to the complex ways in which actors, institutions, discourses, as well as political imaginations, technologies, and infrastructures, interact, to consolidate regimes of power

and to create new meanings and relations in society. Embedded in the Foucauldian understanding of government and policing, the anthropological approaches to policy offer a convincing set of methods to study policy assemblages. These approaches to policies recognized important canons: that policies are not confined to 'simple texts' (Shore, 2012) and do not emerge from a single source or somewhat central power authority. Rather, they are 'the outcome of agency and struggle rather than a master plan' (Li, 2005: 386). They originate from the understanding that policy, as a dominant organizing principle of societies, is a nonlinear process, often influenced by unforeseen variables, followed by unforeseen consequences (Shore & Wright, 1997; Wedel et al., 2005). The anthropological approaches to policy can explain how the cultures and worldviews of decision-makers and policy experts, as well as taken-for-granted assumptions and popular opinions, influence policy debates. They can explain that 'what happens in the executive boardroom, the cabinet meeting, or the shareholders' annual general meeting' (Wedel et al., 2005: 34) is very relevant for the making and the outcomes of policies, and they offer productive ways to understand how and why the outcomes 'often contradict the stated intentions of policy makers' (Wedel et al., 2005: 44). Policies are not simply constraining instrumental forces that originate from central sources of power, but also instruments for constructing 'new' meanings, relations, and rationalities of governance in general (Shore, 2012; Shore & Wright, 1997; Wedel et al., 2005), but also in cities, in particular (McCann & Ward, 2012a,b).

However, despite their large theoretical potential, policy assemblage approaches lack methodological considerations (Baker & McGuirk, 2017; McCann & Ward, 2012a,b; Savage, 2020). Based on methods that have longstanding traditions in anthropology and social sciences in general – such as ethnography, participant observation, in-depth interviews, and critical discourse analysis, among others – the anthropological perspectives on policy offer productive ways to operationalize assemblage thinking. Baker and McGuirk (2017: 425) have explored that at least three methodological practices have been used in assemblage thinking: adopting ethnographic sensibility, tracing sites and situations, and revealing labors of assembling. Yet, few of the many accounts using assemblage-inflicted methodologies 'are explicit about their methodological practice' (Baker & McGuirk, 2017: 425). Further work is needed to build a methodological basis for the policy assemblage approach. In this paper, I introduce the method of *constructive juxtaposition* to address this gap.

### 3. The method of constructive juxtaposition

This study argues for an interdisciplinary approach to studying policy assemblages. This approach facilitates a critical engagement in a single study, with, on the one hand, the intended or unintended outcomes of policies or related initiatives and, on the other hand, the understanding of the ways in which that outcome is (re)produced in particular interplays between actors, institutions, and discourses in given contexts. The constructive juxtaposition method brings these two, often separate, research agendas into a productive dialogue, a result of which should be a more comprehensive understanding of policy assemblages. As such, this method makes the cause-outcome dichotomy in policy assemblage thinking more tangible and visible. The aim is to study the cause and the outcome simultaneously, and to let the collision of the two produce new understandings of policy assemblages that could not be seen if they were studied separately. The core of this method is that both sides of the juxtaposition are thoroughly researched and explored in a single study. This method combines knowledge and expertise of theories and methods of at least two disciplines – the discipline(s) that are equipped to analyse the outcome (in this case, critical heritage discourses and urban studies) and the disciplines that study policy assemblages. It builds on what Shore and Wright call 'studying through' (1997: 14) and contributes to the 'following the source of a policy – its discourses, prescriptions, and programs – through to those affected by the policy' (Wedel et al., 2005: 40). The techniques

of 'studying through' or 'following' policies and places (McCann & Ward, 2012a; Wedel et al., 2005) focus only on researching and exploring the cause in relation to the outcome, i.e., the ways in which constellations of actors, activities, and influences 'shape policy decisions, their implementation, and their results' (Wedel et al., 2005: 39). The 'constructive juxtaposition' method is based on the assumption that in order to understand the policy assemblage that makes up the cause, a comprehensive understanding of the policy outcome is crucial; a better understanding of the cause influences a better understanding of the outcome and vice versa, and the researcher considers them as symbiotic when analysing the data and producing conclusions. For the researcher, implementing the method means analysing the cause and the outcome in the same study and alternating between them as two sides of the juxtaposition during the analyses of the data.

In this research, applying the method meant continuously putting aspects of the policy assemblage (the interplay between actors, institutions, and discourses in the processes of implementing the EHL initiative and designating heritage as 'European') in a constructive juxtaposition with aspects of outcome of that assemblage (heritage-based narratives about cities and 'European city' ideals). A comprehensive understanding of the ways heritage is made (above all, the concepts of heritage regime and authorized heritage discourses mainly represented by the works of Smith, 2006 and Bendix et al., 2013) and the ways heritage and heritage policies shape city planning and governance, was crucial in understanding the characteristics of the policy assemblage. The understanding of city ideals as 'principles, ideas, or standards that reduce cities and places to one-dimensional images which exclude many realities in the cities in the EU', helped in directing the research towards understanding how interplays between actors, institutions, and discourses are narrowing down the choices of heritage sites and their respective narratives and steering them towards one-dimensionality.

Different kinds of data formed the bases of this research. The analyses of the unplanned outcome – here, 'European city' ideals – involved analyses of the kinds of sites that are designated as 'European', analyses of the narratives about the 'European significance' of heritage that are produced and promoted by the EHL initiative, and, in particular, the ways these heritage sites and their respective narratives relate to cities. The empirical data for this part of the research included documents related to the EHL initiative, such as the EU's official decisions, evaluation reports, panel reports of the EHL Expert Panel, application documents, pre-selection reports, and EHL application forms of individual heritage sites, where available. The analyses of the narratives about the 'European significance' of heritage included, in addition, empirical data such as texts inscribed on the EHL plaques that stand in front of heritage sites in cities in the EU, narratives on the websites of the awarded heritage sites that refer to the Label, as well as narratives in official EU reports and documents, and in application forms of individual heritage sites. As a first step, I analysed the narratives about the 'European significance' of all current EHL sites to understand how many of them are in cities. Officially launched in 2013, the current number of EHL sites is sixty. Currently, almost 80 % of these sites are in cities or involve narratives about cities, and most of the remaining 20 % are archaeological sites located outside cities. The second and larger phase of the research focused only on the sites located in cities. The analyses also included narratives about the 'European significance' of city heritage sites that were rejected for the Label.

The inquiry into the 'cause' is aimed at understanding the dynamics of the bureaucratic processes of designating heritage as 'European', namely, the interplay between actors, institutions, and discourses that lead towards the steering of the Label towards cities and the making of 'European city' ideals. To achieve this aim, I analysed how the EHL initiative is implemented in the Netherlands, one of the founding members of the EU. To date, there are three national EHL heritage sites in the Netherlands: the Peace Palace in the city of The Hague, the Maastricht Treaty in the city of Maastricht, and Kamp Westerbork, which received the Label in 2013, 2017, and 2019, respectively. The

research focuses on the two EHL sites that are located in cities – namely, the Peace Palace and the Maastricht Treaty. Kamp Westerbork is located in a rural area, and thus, it was not included in the research. According to the EHL regulations, the state heritage sectors of the EU member states have a central role in the processes of implementing the EHL initiative. While the final selection of the sites is made by the EHL Expert Panel at the level of the EU, the member states' national EHL bodies pre-select which sites can apply for the Label. I studied the dynamics of two interlinked processes. First, I studied the processes of deciding which heritage sites can be designated as 'European'. This process involved two phases: the pre-selecting of heritage sites that can apply for the Label (at the level of the EU member state) and the selecting of sites to be awarded the Label (at the level of the EU). Second, I studied the writing of the application for the Label, in particular, the writing of the narratives about the 'European significance' of the respective heritage site. I studied aspects of the dynamics between the EHL actors (the heritage actors involved in the process of implementing the EHL initiative and the level of the Netherlands and the level of the EU), the institutions (heritage sectors of the EU and the Netherlands), and discourses on heritage (the meanings and understandings of heritage embedded in the work of the institutions and actors). The empirical data for this part of the study included policies related to the EU's cultural and heritage agendas, documents related to the EHL initiative, and in-depth interviews with EU officials and heritage experts involved in the EHL initiative. These policies include the 'New European Agenda for Culture' (EC, 2018), which outlines the main cultural aims of the EU, and 'Towards an integrated approach to cultural heritage for Europe' (EC, 2014b), which outlines the EU's cultural heritage agenda. This part of the study involved nine interviews with heritage professionals involved in the EHL initiative: two interviews with heritage professionals affiliated with the EU, and seven with national heritage professionals. The aim of the interviews was to understand the dynamics of the interplay between actors, institutions, and discourses in the processes of implementing the EHL initiative in the Netherlands.

#### 4. Towards understanding an assemblage: the sameness of actors, institutions, and discourses

The results of this research point to one main concluding argument: 'European city' ideals are produced in the processes of implementing the EHL as a result of the sameness of values, principles, and meanings within and across the three components of the policy assemblage I studied here, namely, actors, institutions, and discourses. The EHL was interpreted and implemented by the same kind of actors (heritage experts and professionals) who work for or act in the name of institutions that are guided by the same discourses about the meanings of heritage and the ways it should be produced (authorized heritage discourses, as claimed by Smith, 2006). The implementation and evaluation of EHL are exclusively in the hands of heritage experts who work for and act in the name of 'heritage regimes' (Bendix et al., 2013), in this case, the state heritage sectors of the EU member states or the heritage sectors of the EU. These experts often have the same qualifications, experiences, and understanding of heritage. Their task as heritage professionals is to produce and reproduce both the heritage regimes they are part of and the authorized heritage discourses they shape and are shaped by. Their worldviews and understanding of European heritage were also influenced by the EHL as an instrument governing the processes of designating heritage; the EHL regulations and selection criteria shaped their actions as well as their understanding of European heritage.

The bureaucratic machinery of the EHL steers the designation of heritage as 'European' by introducing forms of governance that centre around single institutions: the state heritage sectors of the EU member states. Heritage is most often designated within heritage regimes (Bendix et al., 2013) and it is reproducing autorotative heritage discourses (Smith, 2006). However, in practice, heritage can be produced by a wider range of other institutions, in the form of heritage from below

(Aceska and Minca, 2018) or other bottom-up approaches and visions on heritage – none of which are included in the making and implementation of the EHL initiative. The EU's and the member state's heritage sectors (re)produce the same, autorotative and hegemonic discourses on heritage (Smith, 2006): they value inner monumentality, produce presentable and performative heritage, and, above all, they associate heritage with a material and visible site even when it is intangible (Bendix et al., 2013; Graham et al., 2000; Smith, 2006).

There is no diversity, neither counternarratives nor counterarguments in any of the aspects of this policy assemblage. The sameness of actors, institutions, and discourses that characterized the dynamics I explore in this research led to narrowing down options, produced a standardization of heritage sites and narratives about their 'European significance', and steered the making of one-dimensional narratives of cities. This is most visible in the procedures that heritage sites must follow to apply for the Label and in the bureaucratic processes of writing the narrative about the 'European significance' of the respective heritage site.

##### 4.1. Choosing a heritage site: when the state heritage sector decides

The state heritage sectors of EU member states pre-select the sites that apply for the Label. The research showed that the heritage experts working for the state EHL body often initiate the process; they sometimes personally contact the heritage professionals employed at heritage sites to suggest to them to apply for the Label. Once the state heritage sector has pre-selected the sites, it submits the chosen applications to the central EHL bodies at the EU level. In this phase, a committee of 13 independent heritage experts assesses the proposed sites and awards an EHL title if the application is successful. The state's role in this process does not end here; once a site has received the Label, the state is still responsible for its monitoring, functionality, and financing.

The state-centred implementation of the EHL initiative resulted in excluding a variety of heritage sites and steering the Label mainly towards cities. The dominant state discourses on heritage unfold around the idea that heritage is a tool of power that states use to build national identities and to impose a single lens through which people can understand the past (Graham et al., 2000; Silva & Santos, 2012). Thus, in practice, the state heritage sectors of EU member states are determined to pre-select only heritage sites that have already been designated as national heritage, undermining the different interpretations of heritage produced by non-state heritage actors. Thus, only selected heritage sites from the established heritage canons of EU member states can be pre-selected. The established heritage sites that play a role in the making of national histories and identities within EU states – such as palaces, monuments, town halls, and university buildings, among many others – are often located in prominent parts of cities, unlike non-state or bottom-up heritage sites. They are accompanied by city signs that navigate the visitors towards them and other pronounced promotional strategies and infrastructure. In addition, many historical events that are designated as 'European', such as the signing of important EU treaties or the invention of influential architectural styles, have happened mainly in cities, as demonstrated by the case of the Maastricht Treaty.

##### 4.2. Producing a narrative about the 'European significance' of a heritage site

Heritage comes with narratives about history, senses of belonging, togetherness, and land that are promoted on plaques in front of heritage sites, on official city websites, in tourism brochures and other promotional strategies of the tourism industries, and in popular and professional media. These narratives affect strategies of urban governance and planning and unfold in other areas beyond city branding and marketing.

The EHL comes with narratives about the 'European significance' of the respective heritage which are produced in the process of writing the application that heritage sites submit to the EU. The ways in which this



narrative is produced demonstrate the principles of sameness within the policy assemblage: this narrative is simultaneously written and evaluated by a small number of like-minded heritage experts, who perceive the EHL regulations as ‘neutral’, as several experts specified in the interviews, and whose understanding of heritage is limited to the single and dominant autorotative heritage discourses (Smith, 2006). The narrative about the ‘European significance’ of heritage is produced by heritage experts who act in the name of the state heritage sector, and it is evaluated by heritage experts with the same qualifications, experience, and understanding of heritage who act in the name of the EU. Thus, the authority of heritage experts lies in their power to simultaneously construct and legitimize the dominant hegemonic state narratives about heritage, belonging, and land (Smith, 2006). These heritage actors (re) produce only the voice of the state and the EU (through their heritage policies and instruments) in the making of the narrative. Other voices – those of the non-state or non-EU heritage initiatives, different interpretations of history, the voice of diversity groups, and the voice of city dwellers, among many others – are excluded from the narrative writing process. In addition, in the cases I explored, the narrative was written by a few heritage experts only, sometimes even just one person, in coordination with the national EHL bodies who coordinate the process. In one case, an official working for the heritage site had written the narrative singlehandedly within a few weeks, after the EHL national coordination body rejected the first application of the heritage site and told this official to rewrite the application altogether.

These heritage experts tailored their actions towards EHL as a tool for governing the processes of designating heritage, and their single aim was to write a successful application. According to them, the EHL instrument should not be questioned or contested; they experienced it is a useful, neutral, and pragmatic tool, demonstrating once more what Shore and Wright (1997) called ‘masking of the political under the cloak of neutrality’ (1997: 8). In the processes of the writing of the narratives about the ‘European significance’, they were guided by EHL’s criteria and vision of heritage (and not, for example, by the idea of producing inclusive heritage).

In the absence of diversity and counterarguments, the making of the narrative about the ‘European significance’ of heritage meant following a set of ‘best practices’ related to ‘what Brussels wants’, as often specified in the interviews. The ‘best practices’ are the main topic of correspondence between the makers of the narratives at the heritage site level and the national coordinators of the EHL initiative. Thus, the role of national coordinators is to check whether the narratives fit their understanding of ‘best practices’, as seen in this statement of one heritage expert involved in the coordinating of the EHL initiative in the Netherlands:

“But to prove what exactly the European dimension is – that’s the toughest part. Most applicants say that they have a museum and they tell its story every day. Or, this person is a very important painter. Van Gogh – of course, Van Gogh has a European value. Yes, but write it down! Prove it to me! Tell me where this European dimension is! How did this painter or how did this object or paper change the European world? How does this affect European culture? This is the way applicants have to think about their proposal, which is not easy for them. I am critical, so I tell them ‘This is not enough! Brussels will say this is weak, so you have to rethink and find new information because this is not enough!’ They are sometimes disappointed because I ask them very critical questions, but it is better that I do it... Otherwise, the Council for Culture will do it, and otherwise, Brussels would do it.”

In the absence of a diversity of actors, institutions, and discourses, the level at which higher-ranked experts master the ‘best practices’ produced in this policy assemblage is crucial for the success of the application. This is mainly visible in the ways applications are evaluated by the EHL Expert Panel at the EU level. The Panel assesses only the competence of the heritage experts who produced the narrative about

the ‘European significance’ of heritage, and not the actual role of that heritage site in the making of the EU. This is mostly visible in the arguments of the EHL Expert Panel about why an application is rejected. For example, the town of Monemvasia in Greece seems to be having it all: in the narrative about its ‘European significance’, the town is depicted as a site of multiculturalism, diversity, and tolerance (the main values the EU ascribes to itself in its promotional strategies). It is even described with the popular mainstream metaphor of a ‘melting pot’ and depicted as a place for different ethnicities and religions, important in the making of the EU (EC, 2017: 32). Yet, the committee did not give the site a positive evaluation as ‘these interesting elements [...] are not well articulated or conveyed in the application’ (EC, 2017: 32). The argument that the ‘European significance’ of heritage is ‘not well articulated or conveyed in the application’, in that exact wording, is present in almost every rejected application. Along the way, new meanings of European heritage were produced, guided by the EHL as an instrument of the EU, which became the current norm of how heritage is designated as ‘European’, as demonstrated by this statement by a member of the EHL Expert Panel:

Previously, people were so concerned about their site. In the best scenario, they were presenting it in a national context, but even so, it was often a little bit old-fashioned. But now people are thinking rather like ‘Hm, but what happened at the same time in that other country or that other country? Or did we influence others? Or did we influence others? How do we situate that in global history?’ These are new questions.

This quote clearly demonstrates the power of policy and its instruments to shape new meanings, relations, and rationalities of governance.

## 5. The unintended outcome: from the sameness of actors, institutions, and discourses to standardization of heritage sites and narratives

As a result of the sameness of actors, institutions, and discourses, the kinds of heritage sites that are designated as ‘European’ and the acceptable narratives about the ‘European significance’ of heritage considerably narrowed down to a small number of limited options. First, the EHL sites are mainly located in prominent parts of cities often featured in tourist maps (and not, for example, in the outskirts of cities or in dominantly residential areas). Second, the EHL legitimizes sameness instead of diversity in the kinds of heritage sites that have received the Label, failing to recognize almost any kind of diversity in EU cities. Third, the EHL repeatedly produces and validates homogenous and mainstream narratives about the ‘European significance’ of heritage. This standardization of sites and narratives leads to the making of one-dimensional images of the cities in the EU.

### 5.1. The EHL as a city label

Most EHL heritage sites are in cities, and what is more important, many of the narratives about their ‘European significance’ refer to ‘the city’ as a whole, rather than just the heritage site in focus. There are also cases in which whole cities are designated as ‘European’. For example, in the narrative about the ‘European significance’ of the city of Kaunas in Lithuania it is stated that the city received the Label because the overall ‘economic, cultural, architectural, and educational development’ of the city ‘created an urban landscape exuberantly reflecting European interwar modernism’ (EC, 2014a: 15). Similarly, the narrative about the city of Szentendre in Hungary says that the city received the Label because ‘the character of the city’ has been shaped through values similar to those of the EU (EC, 2019: 22). In many narratives, cities are given ‘active’ roles in the founding the EU. The Peace Palace in The Hague received the Label because ‘the peace efforts of The Hague’ in the making of the EU are embodied in the palace (EC, 2013: 5). In the

narrative about the Musical Heritage Sites of the city of Leipzig in Germany, the emphasis is on ‘the role of the city and its citizenry’ in the making of the ‘European values of freedom and democracy’ (EC, 2017: 9). In many cases, the names of the heritage sites and the cities where they are located are used interchangeably in the narratives and titles of the prizes and labels. In recent years, there has been a shift in the strategy of ‘particularizing cities’ (Lähdesmäki, 2016) towards other city-based heritage: the Label has also been extended to city plans and strategies of city governance. For example, the ‘Werkbund Estates in Europe 1927–1932’, a transnational site comprising four countries and five cities, was designated as ‘European’ because architects from different parts of Europe found affordable solutions with good designs and quality that met social needs (EC, 2019: 27).

The Label has also played a role in city branding strategies; cities are widely branded as ‘European’ in the promotion and opening ceremonies of the EHL labels. In the Netherlands, for example, in a speech given on the occasion of the unveiling of the EHL plaque of the Maastricht Treaty heritage site, the King’s Commissary of Limburg, the province where the city of Maastricht is located, stated the following:

Welcome here at the gate of the Government, the most European located house in the Netherlands... most European inclined, because here – behind me in this building in our Statenzaal – the Maastricht Treaty was signed. A memorable moment that has put the city as well as the university on the international map.

(Mitroi, 2019: 36)

Similarly, a representative of the Peace Palace in The Hague explained in the interview that the Label was instrumental in the branding strategies of the city. He explained that the city took advantage of the Label to promote its local identity as a city of peace and justice. Around the same year in which the city received the Label, in the emblem of the city it was added ‘Den Haag, Stad van Vrede en Recht’ [The Hague, City of Peace and Justice], as he specified in the interview.

### 5.2. The standardization of heritage sites

The EHL bureaucratic machinery continuously promotes sameness instead of diversity in the kinds of heritage sites that are selected. Currently, there are no EHL sites that refer to Islamic heritage, the Ottoman Empire, or Eastern Christianity. There is no reference to the colonial history of Europe and territories outside the EU are entirely excluded. What is more, the EU and Europe are often used as synonyms. Several heritage sites from the former Eastern Bloc received the Label and were designated as ‘European’. However, in all of them, communism is not presented as a genuine and recognizable ideology that has shaped cities in a certain way, but as a short, somewhat wrong part of the history of cities in the EU. For example, Latvia’s capital, Riga, received the Label in 2019 for one of its most prominent heritage sites, the ‘Three Brothers’, dating from the 15th century. Yet, despite its complex historical values, the EHL-tailored European narrative states that the site was designated as ‘European’ because it helped to ‘sustain a sense of belonging to Europe during the Soviet occupation’ (EC, 2019: 30). At the same time, laudatory discourses referring to elite expressions of European roots are often related to Western Christianity, or classical Greek and Roman antiquity, and are presented as positive and harmonious foundations not only of Europe as a cultural entity but also of the EU. In the narrative about its ‘European significance’, the ancient part of Athens is described as a place where common European values are defined (EC, 2014a: 5). Similarly, the narrative of the archaeological site of Carnuntum in Austria refers to the Roman empire ‘as a predecessor of Europe’ (EC, 2013: 7). These narratives are reproduced in other EU programs related to the designation of heritage and cities as ‘European’: for example, Athens was the first European Capital of Culture in 1985 and Florence the second in 1986.

What is more, the mainstream binaries between the East and West and the metaphor of cities as bridges between them are the only

acceptable interpretations of urban diversity. Over the years, numerous candidate sites have made attempts to receive the Label with arguments that their Europeanness is represented by diversity, as can be seen in their narratives about their ‘European significance’. However, most of them were rejected (EC, 2017: 31–32; EC, 2017: 42–43; EC, 2019: 34). The only city that won the Label because of its diversity was Szentendre in Hungary. Szentendre was designated as ‘European’ because ‘the character of the city [...] enabled the city to function as a bridge between different European cultural areas from East and West, the Balkan and the Carpathian Basin, and Catholic and Orthodox Christianity’ (EC, 2019: 22). In the same year (2019), the city of Sagunto in Portugal was rejected for the Label even though the application centred around the city’s diversity: in the narrative about the ‘European significance’ of the city it is stated that the city is a Roman municipality, a Muslim citadel, a medieval town and centre for the Jewish community (EC, 2019: 34). Yet, this narrative was not sufficient for the city to receive the Label as it ‘does not demonstrate a sufficient level of European significance’ (ibid). This demonstrates that the EHL legitimizes only limited understandings of urban diversity.

### 5.3. The standardization of the narratives about the ‘European significance’ of heritage

When compared to each other, the narratives about the ‘European significance’ of heritage are almost identical: they have the same content, the same length, and they are written with the same phrases and wording. They appear clear and unquestionable and do not offer different interpretations of heritage and critical perspectives. Whether they refer to the city as a whole or its citizenry, or to museums, palaces, or even city plans and urban policies, the narratives about their ‘European significance’ produced within the EHL scheme emphasize their joint efforts in building, anticipating, and working for the EU. They refer to ideas and accomplishments from the past that are seen as beneficial to EU citizens beyond national borders (see also Calligaro, 2013; Lähdesmäki, 2016). Almost every narrative tells the story of how the EU’s official promotional values – democracy, human rights, tolerance, and dialogue – are mapped onto EHL heritage sites. For example, the narratives about the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest, the archive centre and exhibition space Mundamendum in Mons in Belgium, the Dohany Street synagogue complex in Budapest, and many others unfold around the same values of tolerance, openness, and dialogue (EC, 2015: 11–12; EC, 2017: 10).

## 6. From a heritage label to a signifier of ‘European city’ ideals

The EHL is a signifier of ‘European city’ ideals as it validates mainly prominent city sites and produces homogenised and one-dimensional narratives about those sites. And what is more, it maps these one-dimensional images onto particular cities only, by excluding many realities in cities in the EU, such as heritage related to the communist or Ottoman past of cities or heritage sites related to Islam or the colonial history of the EU, among the rest. Thus, it produces ideals that only cities with these distinct characteristics and histories can uphold the merits of and provide cultural roots for the EU. The making of these ‘European city’ ideals cannot be traced back to EHL as a single EU initiative. Heritage lays the foundations for other EU labels, such as the European Capital of Culture and city twinning initiatives. The official frames of all these EU initiatives are similar and do not provide a counter-narrative to each other (Zito & Eckersley, 2018: 16).

Heritage-based city ideals play different roles in the processes of urban change. Heritage is the basis for constructing collective local identities of cities that play a fundamental part in city branding strategies, unfold at the level of urban planning (Graham et al., 2000: 209; Macdonald, 2009; Ljungkvist, 2016; Wang & Gu, 2020) and play a role in the ways city governments claim local and international political authority (Ljungkvist, 2016; Macdonald, 2009). Elements of the

'European city' ideals that are (re)produced by the EHL instrument can be observed in cities in Europe, particularly in relation to the processes of identity-making and creating senses of belonging to the EU. To demonstrate their Europeanness, Eastern European cities, for example, have distanced themselves from their Ottoman or socialist pasts to qualify for the EU's various cultural and heritage programs. To demonstrate its Europeanness, in the application for the label of 'European Capital of Culture' the city of Plovdiv in Bulgaria is compared to Athens and Rome, as representatives of classical Greek and Roman antiquity (Clopot & Strani, 2020). Similarly, in the application for the same label of the city of Pécs, Hungary, it is stated that 'with the exception of Budapest, there is no other city in the country which can boast artistic achievements of European standard' (Takáts, quoted in Lahdesmäki, 2009: 219). An even more telling example is given by Vos (2017) in her study on how the European Commission's aims to use investments in culture as a contribution to EU enlargement were taken up in accession states. She shows how the local heritage sector in the city of Novi Pazar in Serbia self-regulated its decisions on which heritage sites to choose for the application for an EU cultural program. The Serbian heritage sector perceived Islamic and Ottoman heritage as unfit for what they considered to be 'European management practices' and they excluded it from the application.

Studies have provided evidence on how such 'European city' ideals have served as validations of urban reconstruction projects in cities in Europe. One example is the urban reconstruction of North Macedonia's capital, Skopje, spurred by what was called the 'Skopje 2014' project. To demonstrate the country's Europeanness, the project included new buildings, facades, monuments, and statues resembling dominant features of different EU cities, an endeavour called a 'collection of already outdated copies of European elsewhere' (Graan & Takovski, 2017). Arguments about the 'European city' were central in producing claims about the new makeover of the city, embedded in wider political and nation-building agendas, as well as in the ongoing process of privatization (Janev, 2015; Matoli, 2014). The 'European city' ideal in this case meant an implementation of foreign architectural styles, such as classicism and neo-baroque, presented as 'European' by local stakeholders, and at the same time an erasure of the socialist and Ottoman past of the city. Similarly, to appear more 'European' Danish cities employed not only ideas from classicist architecture but also used classicism to provide models for contemporary society and culture (Funder et al., 2019), even though Denmark was never a territorial part of the ancient Greek or Roman empires. In Berlin, too, 'European city' ideals served as justifications to erase socialist architecture (Molnar, 2010). All these examples demonstrate how the 'European city' ideals that are (re)produced by the EHL as an instrument of the EU have served as justifications for urban reconstruction projects and as a basis for redefining collective city narratives about belonging to the EU.

## 7. Conclusion: 'constructive juxtaposition' as a policy assemblage method

One can only try to capture a policy assemblage. They are too complex and elusive; the more one studies them, the more complex and multifaceted they become. This paper unpacks aspects of a policy assemblage – the interplay between actors, institutions, and discourses in the processes of implementation of the EHL, as one of the EU's leading initiatives on common European heritage – to understand how 'European city' ideals are produced within the EU's cultural and heritage policies and agendas. I have argued that it is the sameness within all three elements of the assemblage – actors, institutions, and discourses – that has steered the making of 'European city' ideals.

To address the complexity and elusiveness of policy assemblages and to contribute to the need for constructive methodologies for operationalizing policy assemblages, this paper introduces the method of 'constructive juxtaposition' and engages with an interdisciplinary approach to studying policy assemblages. This method facilitates a

productive dialogue between, on the one hand, intended or unintended outcomes of policies or the related instruments and initiatives, and, on the other hand, the understanding of the ways in which those outcomes are (re)produced in interplays between actors, institutions, and discourses in given contexts. This method builds on approaches and techniques of 'following' policies and places (McCann & Ward, 2012a; Wedel et al., 2005), and is based on the assumption that a comprehensive understanding of the outcome of the policy is crucial for the unpacking of the cause and understanding the policy assemblage. The cause and the outcome are analysed simultaneously in the same study, and applying the method means continuously alternating between them during the research. An important question that remains to be explored is how one goes about analysing and developing a juxtaposition, or even, how one decides what aspects of the phenomena in question should be juxtaposed in order to produce comprehensive results. In this study, the understanding of 'European city' ideals as one-dimensional and exclusive images of cities steered the research towards analysing which aspects of the assemblage, or which interplays between actors, institutions, and discourses, lead towards narrowing down choices, excluding options, and producing one-dimensionality. Without a comprehensive understanding of the outcome, the assemblage would have been more elusive and more difficult to capture. This paper has demonstrated that the method of 'constructive juxtaposition' brings us closer to understanding why devoted heritage professionals, like the ones I met in the Netherlands and whose stories I told at the beginning of the paper, produce outcomes that counter their own intentions and the intentions of the policy instruments they implement.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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