

Call for Participation for the Exhibition “Deep Surface: Polyfunctional architecture to enhance the experience of UNESCO Designated Sites”

On the occasion of
19th International Architecture Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia
(10 May – 23 November 2025)

Deadline: 13 October 2024

1. Introduction

UNESCO designated sites (here intended with a focus on World Heritage properties, Biosphere Reserves and UNESCO Global Geoparks) are a unique and interconnected network including thousands of outstanding places and communities that, individually and collectively, contribute to UNESCO’s mission towards building peace, sustainable development, intercultural dialogue, and the eradication of poverty. These sites attract a diverse range of visitors and hold the potential to support various ecological and socio-economic functions, ideally reconciling the preservation of the planet’s cultural and natural heritage with improved quality of life for local communities.

Within this framework, **Visitor Centres*** in UNESCO designated sites can play a crucial role in the achievement of the site management’s objectives by regulating or facilitating access, contributing to education and heritage interpretation, improving tourism management, showcasing environmentally and culturally sustainable practices, fostering stewardship for heritage, and promoting social inclusion while catering to the needs and expectations of both visitors and local communities.

* The definition of **Visitor Centre** within the present framework refers to any kind of physical facility **integrated within site management systems** to officially provide **dedicated services** for supporting the presentation, interpretation, access to, and sustainable visit of **UNESCO designated sites**.

This concept includes a broad range of structures that can carry different names (such as “site museums”, “interpretation centres”, “information centres”, “community centres”, “houses”, “gateways” etc.) and have different functions and architectural features.

Architectural solutions adopted by Visitor Centres* in UNESCO designated sites are polymorphous and polyfunctional. Site-specific architecture and interdisciplinary knowledge hold the potential to harness the natural, cultural, and collective *inherent intelligence* of sites to sustain heritage conservation and management with a people-centred approach. In addition to showcasing excellence in design, architectural solutions for Visitor Centres* in UNESCO



designated sites can contribute to addressing the complexity of today's global challenges and propose context-sensitive innovative and creative solutions for a more mindful and meaningful relationship with sites.

2. Scope and Objectives

UNESCO is considering developing, in the framework of a partnership with The Royal Commission for AIUla (RCU), an exhibition under the provisional title “**Deep Surface: Polyfunctional architecture to enhance the experience of UNESCO designated sites**”, planned to take place within the premises of the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe (Venice, Italy) from May to November 2025, within the framework of the **19th International Architecture Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia**.

The exhibition aims to explore the **context-specific architectural and functional features of Visitor Centres* in UNESCO designated sites**, and notably their **experiences and good practices regarding heritage interpretation, education, community-oriented services, enhancement of cognitive and physical accessibility of sites, and sustainable tourism management**.

The exhibition will especially showcase Visitor Centres* that excelled through distinguished architectural practice in achieving the objectives of the concerned systems of UNESCO designations, while operating in alignment with the related operational and normative frameworks. For example, when operating in a **World Heritage** property, Visitor Centres* shall ensure the protection and possible enhancement of Outstanding Universal Values conforming with the World Heritage Convention and its Operational Guidelines, avoiding any negative impact on the OUV including the integrity and authenticity of the property. In the context of the Man and the Biosphere programme, such centres have to respond to the paramount mission of **Biosphere Reserves** as 'learning places for sustainable development', serving to understand and manage interactions between social and ecological systems. Similarly, Visitor Centres* in **UNESCO Global Geoparks** shall support the interpretation of geological heritage in connection with all other aspects of the area's natural and cultural heritage, to enhance awareness and understanding of key issues facing society.

The exhibition is aimed at managing authorities, decision-makers, civil society organisations, businesses, researchers, and other practitioners with an interest in the protection and presentation of UNESCO designated sites, as well as at visitors to Venice and the Architecture Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia (e.g. architects and industry experts, art enthusiasts, journalists, researchers, students, curious tourists, local residents, etc.).

Building on the insights from a series of UNESCO [regional workshops](#) for Europe organised between 2018 and 2022, the exhibition seeks to expand the exchange of experiences at the global level and stimulate dialogue, advance knowledge, foster innovation, and sensitise the public to view UNESCO designated sites as laboratories for transformative change towards a more sustainable and equitable future. The **long-term objectives** of the initiative are:

- **raising awareness** of the role that Visitor Centres* can play in UNESCO designated sites, acting as a mediator between places, visitors and local communities, fostering appreciation and stewardship, as well as more meaningful and sustainable interactions with cultural and natural heritage;
- **leveraging intelligence and resources** to enhance Visitor Centres* and on-site museums in UNESCO designated sites;

- **inspiring site managing authorities** to integrate a sustainable development perspective into the planning of Visitor Centres* and broader site management systems;
- **cultivating more mindful visitors**, seeking not only recreational but also self-improvement opportunities, and behaving respectfully to heritage sites, local communities and the global environment.

The exhibition and its related programme of events will also serve as a platform for **networking** among relevant actors at international, regional, and local levels, spanning both public and private sectors to foster cooperation and synergies.

3. Eligibility and selection criteria

This call is open to **official Visitor Centres*** in the context of UNESCO designated sites, notably World Heritage properties, Biosphere Reserves, and UNESCO Global Geoparks.

The following categories are all eligible for consideration:

- **New site-specific establishments:** recently built Visitor Centres* that have been specially designed for a UNESCO designated site to help address its management needs and priorities.
- **Converted structures:** facilities that have undergone heritage conservation, restoration, rehabilitation, or adaptive reuse with the specific purpose of serving as a Visitor Centre* for a UNESCO designated site.
- **Small-scale interventions:** Visitor Centres* not necessarily with prominent architectural features, including small-size structures and low-budget interventions demonstrating effectiveness and innovation capacity.
- **Projects in the pipeline:** already approved but not yet operational Visitor Centres*, provided they already have a complete architectural design and a clear definition of their functions, services, and managerial structure.

In addition, eligible Visitor Centres* can:

- be either **centralised** (with all functions and services concentrated in one single building or complex), or **decentralised** (using multiple structures to provide different services or have better coverage of the area);
- serve either a **single** UNESCO designated site or more than one in a **multi-designated** area.

Applications from Visitor Centres* to participate in the exhibition will be reviewed by UNESCO to assess their eligibility and relevance against the following **criteria**:

1. Education and heritage interpretation:

- 1.1 How does the Visitor Centre* contribute to high-quality, meaningful, and mindful visitor experiences with tailored services for **heritage interpretation**? These may include both personal and non-personal services to turn cultural and natural phenomena into meaningful experiences that offer paths to deeper meaning, provoke resonance and participation, and foster stewardship for all heritage.
- 1.2 How does the Visitor Centre* contribute to enhancing the associated UNESCO designated site(s) as a **learning environment**? This may include activities to support education for



sustainable development and global citizenship, as well as lifelong learning opportunities to respond to contemporary global challenges.

- 1.3 How does the Visitor Centre* contribute to communicating the respective **UNESCO designation system(s)** (e.g. World Heritage Convention / system; the Man and the Biosphere Programme; the International Geoscience and Geoparks Programme) and the overall **mission of UNESCO**?

2. Visitor management

- 2.1 How does the Visitor Centre* help **manage visitor flows** at its UNESCO designated site(s) to address the site's management needs and priorities (e.g. decongesting sensitive areas, redistributing tourist flows, tackling seasonality, etc.)?
- 2.2 How does the Visitor Centre* contribute to **understanding visitors** and their **visiting experiences** in the associated UNESCO designated site(s) (e.g. by collecting and analysing qualitative and quantitative data to support informed decision-making)?

3. Community-oriented services

- 3.1 How does the Visitor Centre* **cater to the needs of local communities** in the territory of the associated UNESCO designated site(s) (e.g. by offering priority access, special events, courses, dedicated activities, services and facilities)?
- 3.2 How does the Visitor Centre* **contribute to the local economy** in the territory of the associated UNESCO designated site (e.g. by creating job opportunities, leveraging local creativity and entrepreneurship, or promoting local products)?

4. Inclusion and participation

- 4.1 How does the Visitor Centre* **engage and develop synergies with local actors** in its planning and/or management (e.g. through participatory decision-making processes, consultations or partnerships with local authorities, CSOs, businesses, education and research institutes, etc.)?
- 4.2 How does the Visitor Centre* contribute to enhancing the **accessibility** of the associated UNESCO designated site(s) while ensuring compliance with heritage conservation requirements (e.g. by reducing physical and cognitive barriers; regulating access to sensitive areas; providing transportation service(s), etc.)?
- 4.3 How does the Visitor Centre* address **gender equality, youth engagement**, and the specific needs of **disadvantaged groups**?

5. Architectural quality

- 5.1 How does the Visitor Centre*'s design **respect and reflect** the aesthetic, historical, scientific, **cultural and natural values** of the associated UNESCO designated site(s) (e.g. by adapting the design typology, siting, form, scale, materials, look and feel to the site's natural and built context?)
- 5.2 How does the Visitor Centre*'s design **support the functions** related to the above sets of Criteria 1 to 4?
- 5.3 How do the Visitor Centre*'s design, construction and activities ensure **“no negative impact”** on the cultural and/or natural values of its UNESCO designated site(s), in line with the applicable local and international heritage protection requirements (e.g. through preliminary heritage and/or environmental impact assessment)?



5.4 How do the Visitor Centre*'s design, construction, and operations promote **sustainability and resilience** (e.g. by using sustainable materials, sourcing locally, maximising energy efficiency, using energy from renewable sources, minimising waste and carbon footprint, etc.)?

4 How to apply

Visitor Centres* interested in participating in the exhibition can apply through the [online form](#), providing all the required information, including the **Detailed Description Form** as a mandatory annex (additional supporting info and materials on the submitted case might be requested during the reviewing process as need be). Please note that the information entered online can be saved by clicking on the "Resume later" button and creating your profile and retrieved at a later stage by clicking on the "Load unfinished survey" button. Kindly ensure to save your credentials, as the system does not allow to recover them.

Applications will only be considered if sent following the above procedure and received **by 13 October 2024, 23:59 (CET)**.

For any query, you may contact veniceoffice@unesco.org.