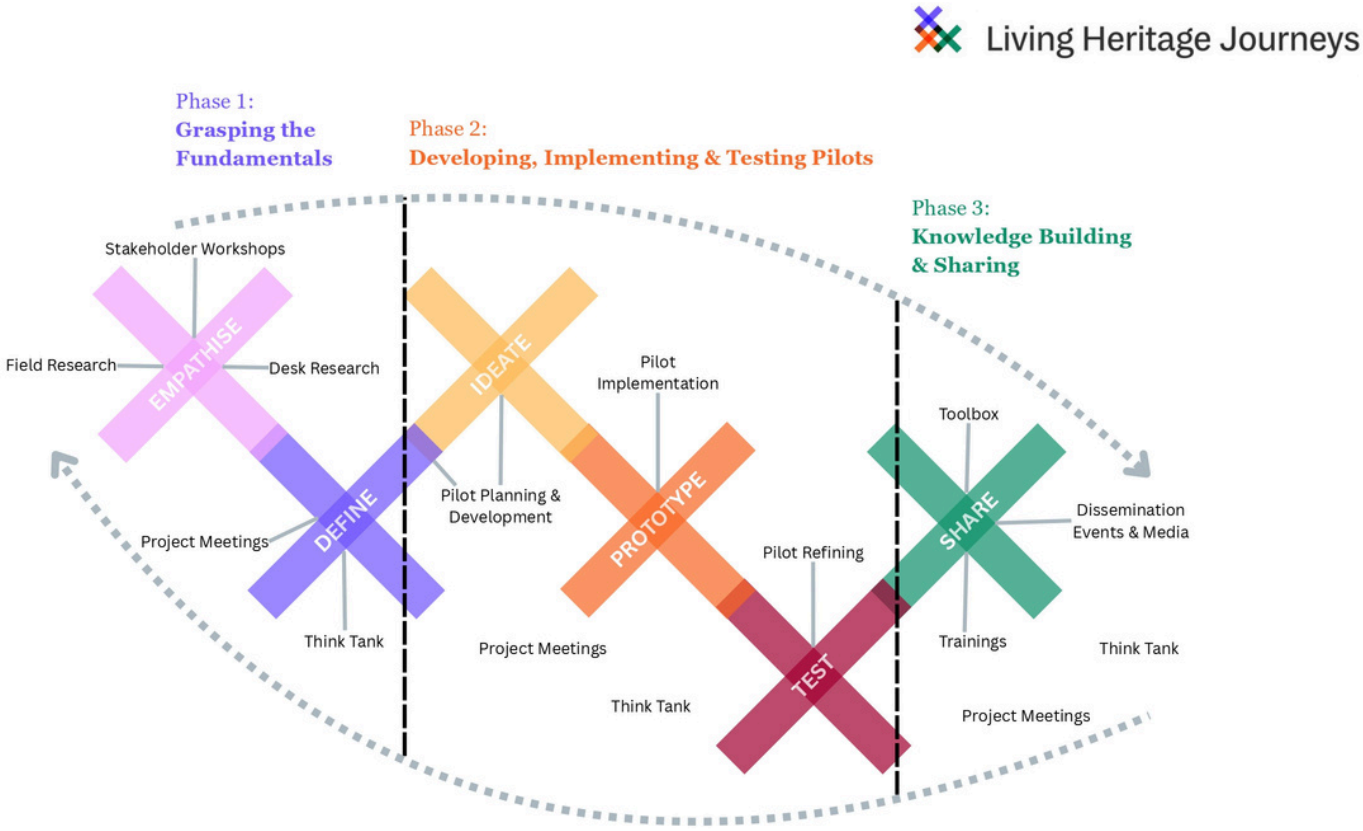
The Design Thinking Approach Behind Living Heritage Journeys

As with many exciting journeys, there is (as yet) no guidebook for this project. To navigate this uncharted territory, we are applying the **Design Thinking** approach.

Design Thinking is a human-centred, iterative process used to solve complex challenges by understanding users' needs, challenging assumptions, and redefining problems. It focuses on creating innovative, sustainable solutions that are supported, functional, and desirable.

At its core, Design Thinking encourages empathy, creative collaboration, experimentation, and continual refinement—making it a natural fit for the goals and collaborative nature of Living Heritage Journeys.

The diagram below illustrates how Design Thinking is applied throughout the Living Heritage Journeys project. In addition to the standard five stages, we have added a sixth stage—Share—to reflect our commitment to widely disseminating insights and methods developed across different pilot contexts.



Phase 1: Grasping the Fundamentals

The first phase of the project gathers deep insights into the living heritage practices, heritage communities' visions and wishes, tourism stakeholders' perspectives, visitor expectations, policy environments, and inspirational practices.
Here, the Design Thinking stages of Empathise and Define play a key role. Empathise involves a human-centred process to understand people and their needs.

Define draws on the insights gathered to collaboratively determine the project's specific challenges and next steps.

Main steps of Phase 1:

- Desk Research: Conducting situation scans in each partner country to understand local policies, actors, and inspirational examples.
- Field Research: Using visitor questionnaires in the five pilot areas to uncover visitor perspectives on living heritage and tourism.
- Stakeholder Workshops: Running co-creative workshops with local heritage communities and tourism actors to identify needs, concerns, and visions.
- Project Meetings: Regular meetings between the consortium partners, and with various stakeholders, to reflect on gathered data and plan forward.
- Think Tank: Drawing on expert perspectives to navigate challenges and enrich the process.

Phase 2: Developing, Implementing and Testing Pilots

Building on the insights from Phase 1, the second phase focuses on developing and experimenting with concepts that connect living heritage practices to tourism in each pilot location.
Design Thinking stages involved here include **Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test**.

- Define: Synthesising data to clarify challenges, objectives, and priorities.
- Ideate: Brainstorming and co-creating innovative solutions with stakeholders.
- Prototype: Finalising and implementing innovative, scalable initiatives.
- Test: Gathering feedback to refine pilot projects and ensure they meet community and visitor needs.

Key project steps in Phase 2:

- Pilot Planning and Development: Co-creating and planning tourism concepts with stakeholders.
- Pilot Implementation: Launching pilots in all five project locations.
- Pilot Refining: Iterative adjustments and evaluations to enhance linkages between living heritage and tourism.
- Project Meetings: Ongoing exchange of learnings across pilot teams.
- Think Tank: Continued expert feedback and support.

Phase 3: Knowledge Building and Sharing

While knowledge building and sharing is ongoing, this final phase formalizes it as a key priority. This is where our additional Design Thinking stage—Share—comes to the forefront.
Insights and methods are disseminated through impactful media, an online toolbox, training materials, webinars, and our learning network. Sharing not only increases the project's impact but also invites feedback from broader audiences, reinforcing the iterative, ongoing nature of Design Thinking.

Key project steps in Phase 3:

- Project Meetings: Opportunities to reflect, consolidate insights, and plan for broader dissemination.
- Think Tank: Final reflections and forward-looking recommendations from experts.
- Dissemination Events & Media: Presenting results to wider audiences via events and media platforms.
- Trainings: Offering transnational webinars and workshops to share approaches and tools.
- Toolbox: Creating an online resource that captures all lessons learned, offering practical tools for future initiatives and inviting users to join a collaborative learning network.

Although these phases appear sequential, various activities occur in parallel. Continuous iteration and feedback loops are essential to refining outcomes and achieving sustainable solutions.

To follow this Design Thinking journey as it unfolds across the five pilots, visit our Journeys pages.

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