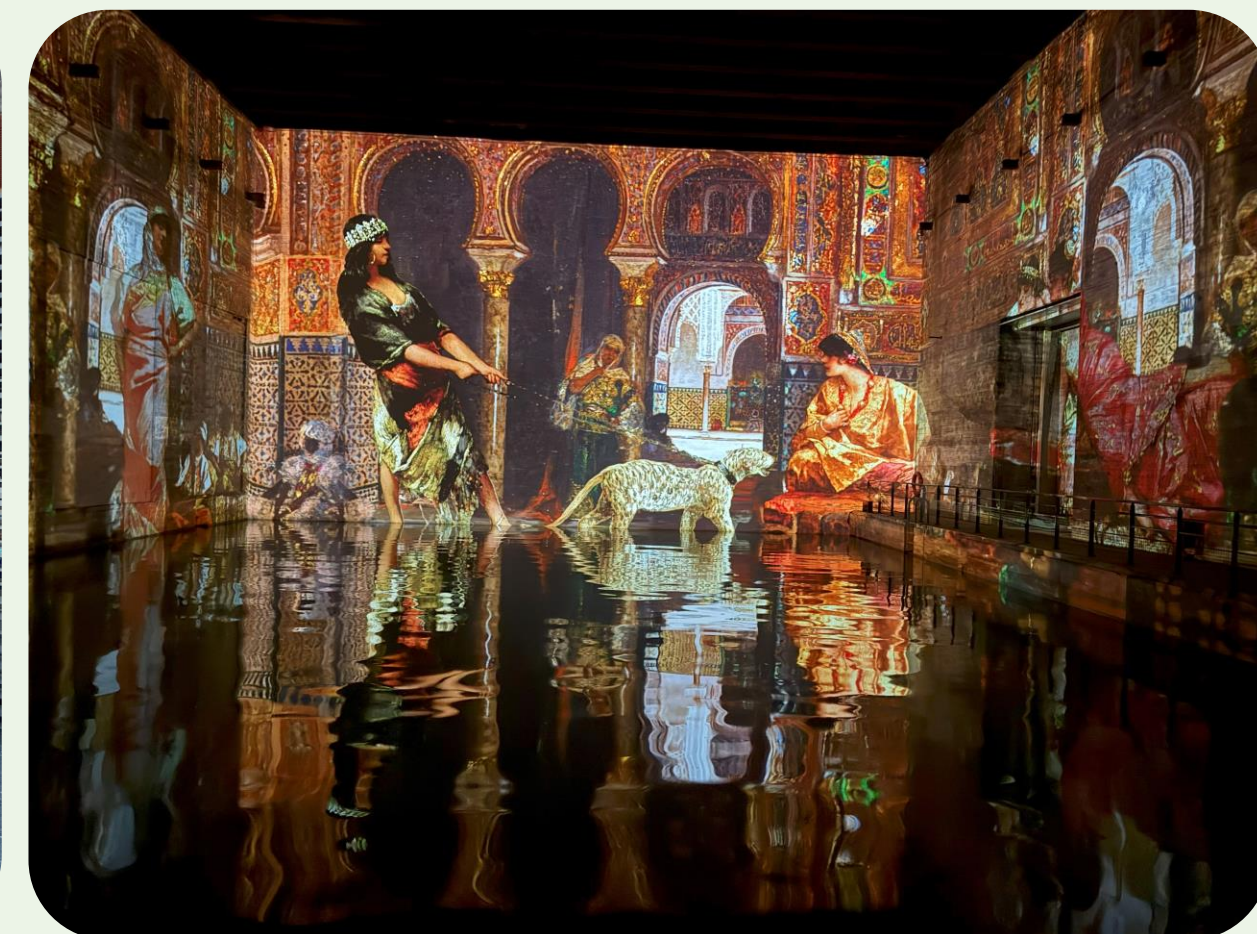




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## Bassins de Lumières



Location: Bordeaux, France  
Focus: Adaptive reuse, immersive art, sustainable tourism



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# Introduction



**Name of the Initiative:** Bassins de Lumières



**Location:** Bordeaux, France



**Managing Organization:** Culturespaces



**Launch Date:** June 10, 2020



**Status:** Ongoing

The **primary objectives** of the **Bassins de Lumières** are:

- To repurpose a historic WWII submarine base into a vibrant cultural venue.
- To provide immersive digital art experiences that are accessible to a broad audience.
- To contribute to the cultural and economic revitalization of the Bordeaux region.
- The project focuses on cultural, economic and environmental aspects, aiming to blend heritage preservation with modern technological innovation.

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# The Practice

## Description of the Practice

The **Bassins de Lumières** is an **immersive digital art centre** located inside the **U-Boot-Bunker, a German-built World War II submarine base in Bordeaux**. Construction began in 1941, designed to shelter up to 15 U-boats during Nazi occupation. Despite heavy Allied bombardment, the structure survived intact until Bordeaux's liberation in August 1944. Over the decades, the vast site saw occasional use, as a metallurgy plant, a venue for festivals and even as a film set.

In **2018**, the **City of Bordeaux** granted **Culturespaces** a long-term concession to transform part of the structure into a **cultural venue**. Over two years, Culturespaces **invested significant resources to redevelop the space, installing 90 video projectors, 100 kilometres of optical fibre, and creating advanced sound and light infrastructure**. The result is the Bassins de Lumières, which opened in 2020. Currently, **only four of the eleven enormous basins are in use**. However, the entire 41,000 m<sup>2</sup> site is being progressively redeveloped into a multi-purpose arts complex, incorporating galleries, workshops and performance spaces.

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# The Practice

## Activities Involved:

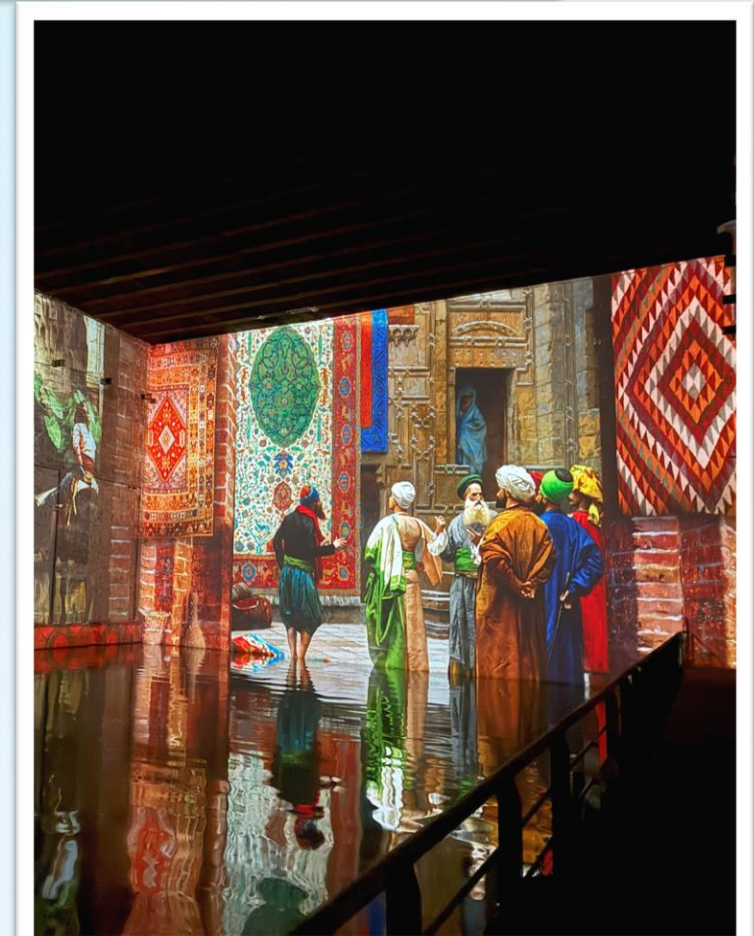
- Immersive digital art exhibitions featuring classical and contemporary artists.
- Educational programs and workshops.
- Cultural events and performances.

## Target Groups:

- Local and international tourists.
- Art enthusiasts and students.
- Families and general public.

## Stakeholders Involvement:

- While the management is primarily handled by Culturespaces, the project was developed in partnership with the City of Bordeaux, which provided the venue under a concession agreement.



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# Local Benefits and Impact

## ECONOMIC IMPACT

- **Transformed an unused WWII submarine base** into a **cultural** and **tourism landmark**, generating long-term economic value through ticket sales, events and local spending
- Attracts **both domestic and international tourists**, supporting the wider Bordeaux tourism and hospitality economy
- Created **new jobs in digital production**, technical operations, cultural mediation and visitor services

## CULTURAL IMPACT

- Provides **access to large-scale immersive art experiences**, blending classical and contemporary works in an innovative format
- **Revives public interest** in historical memory by situating art in a former site of conflict, **turning a symbol of war into a place of culture and dialogue**
- Expands **cultural participation** by making art more approachable to diverse audiences, including families and young people

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# Local Benefits and Impact

## ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

- Repurposes existing infrastructure with minimal new construction, significantly **reducing material use** and **environmental impact**
- Uses **high-efficiency lighting** and **AV systems** suited to the structure's energy constraints
- Sets a precedent for **environmentally responsible heritage** reuse in post-industrial or military sites

## SOCIAL IMPACT

- **Reinforces local identity** by reimagining a previously inaccessible space as a civic and cultural destination
- Offers an **inclusive, sensory-rich experience accessible to different age groups and backgrounds**
- Stimulates **pride** and **engagement in cultural heritage** by reactivating a neglected part of the city

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# Visitors Benefits and Impact

By combining immersive digital art with a historically significant site, Bassins de Lumières offers visitors a powerful, multi-sensory experience that is both culturally enriching and emotionally resonant. The venue makes art more accessible while transforming the way audiences interact with history, architecture, and storytelling.

## Key Visitor Benefits:

- Immersive cultural experience through large-scale digital projections, music, and light, allowing deep engagement with classical and modern art
- Unique atmosphere created by the vast water-filled chambers of the former submarine base, which enhances the emotional and spatial impact of each exhibition
- Affordable and inclusive access to high-quality art experiences, attracting a wide demographic including children, seniors, and international tourists
- Educational enrichment through thematic exhibitions that connect art, history, architecture, and digital creativityAlternative to traditional museums, making the arts approachable for audiences who may not usually visit galleries or heritage sites

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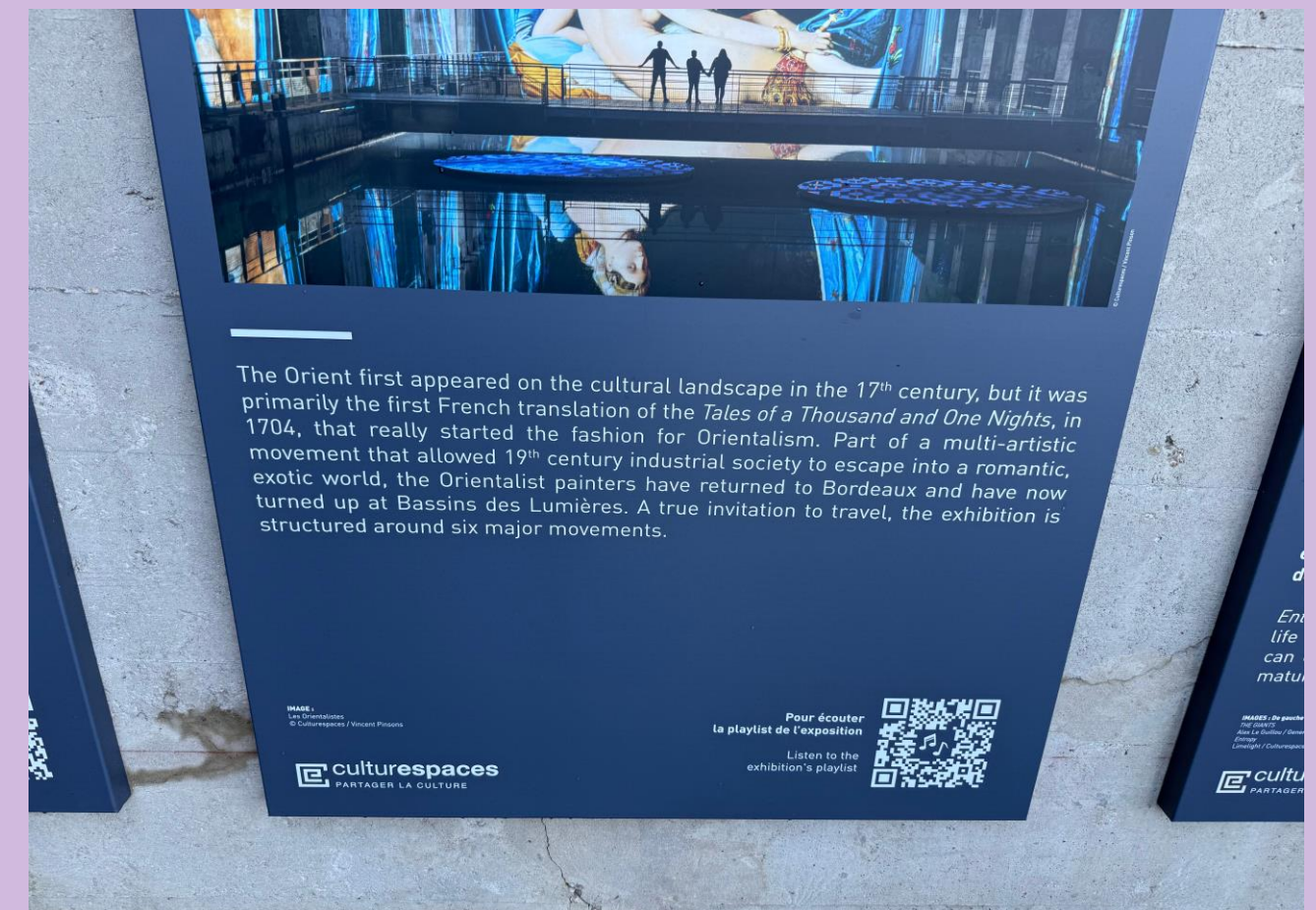
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# Sustainability Measures

## Cultural Preservation:

- Reclaims a WWII submarine base, a site of traumatic history, and transforms it into a space for art, education, and memory
- Juxtaposes digital exhibitions with raw architectural heritage, respecting historical authenticity while promoting new cultural narratives
- Makes art accessible to diverse audiences, including those less likely to visit traditional museums



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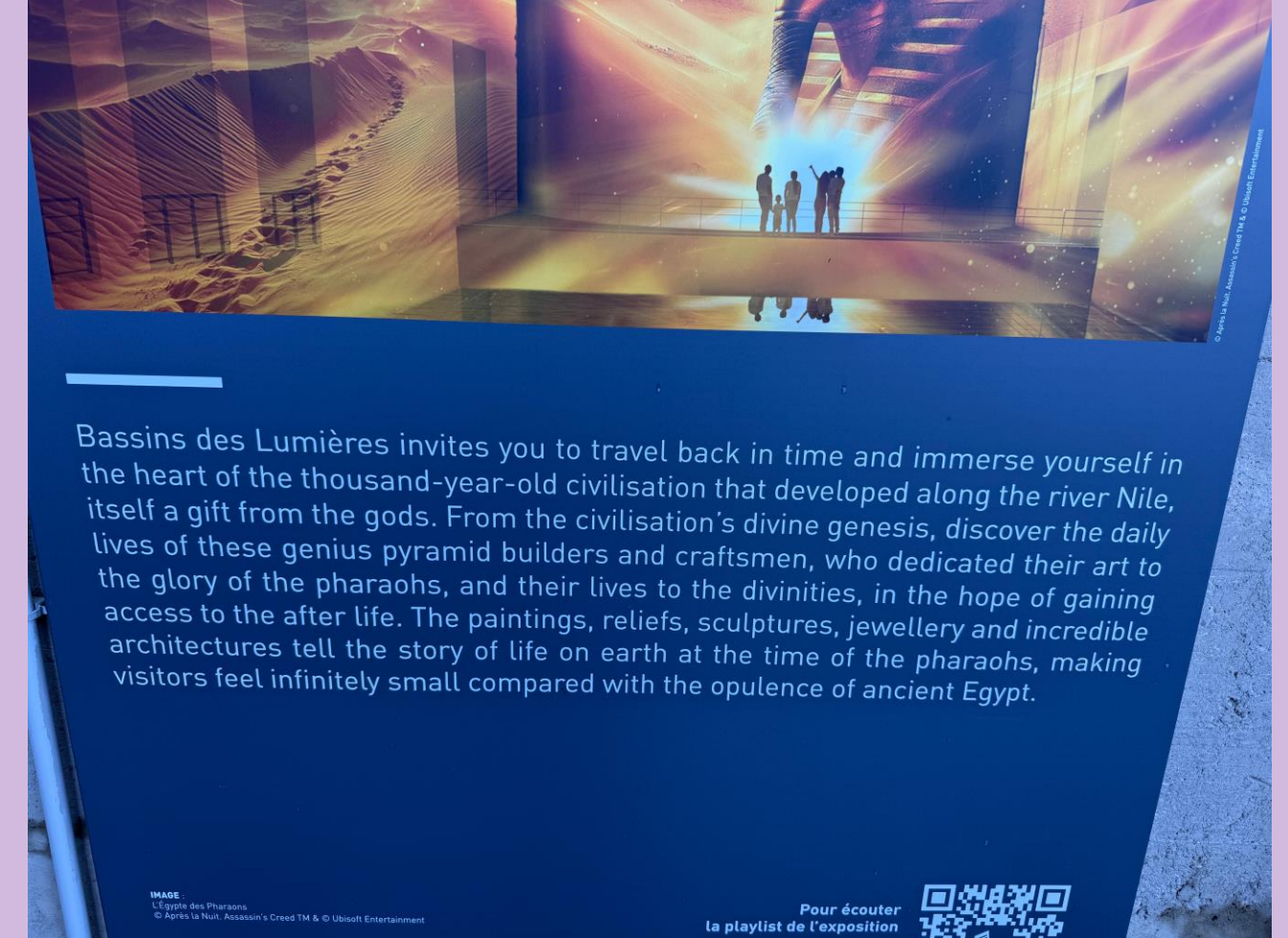
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# Sustainability Measures

## Economic Sustainability:

- Generates steady tourism income for Bordeaux's local economy through ticketing, events, and cultural programming
- Operates under a public-private partnership model (with Culturespaces), ensuring both profitability and cultural value
- Revitalizes an unused zone, stimulating surrounding economic activity without requiring new land use



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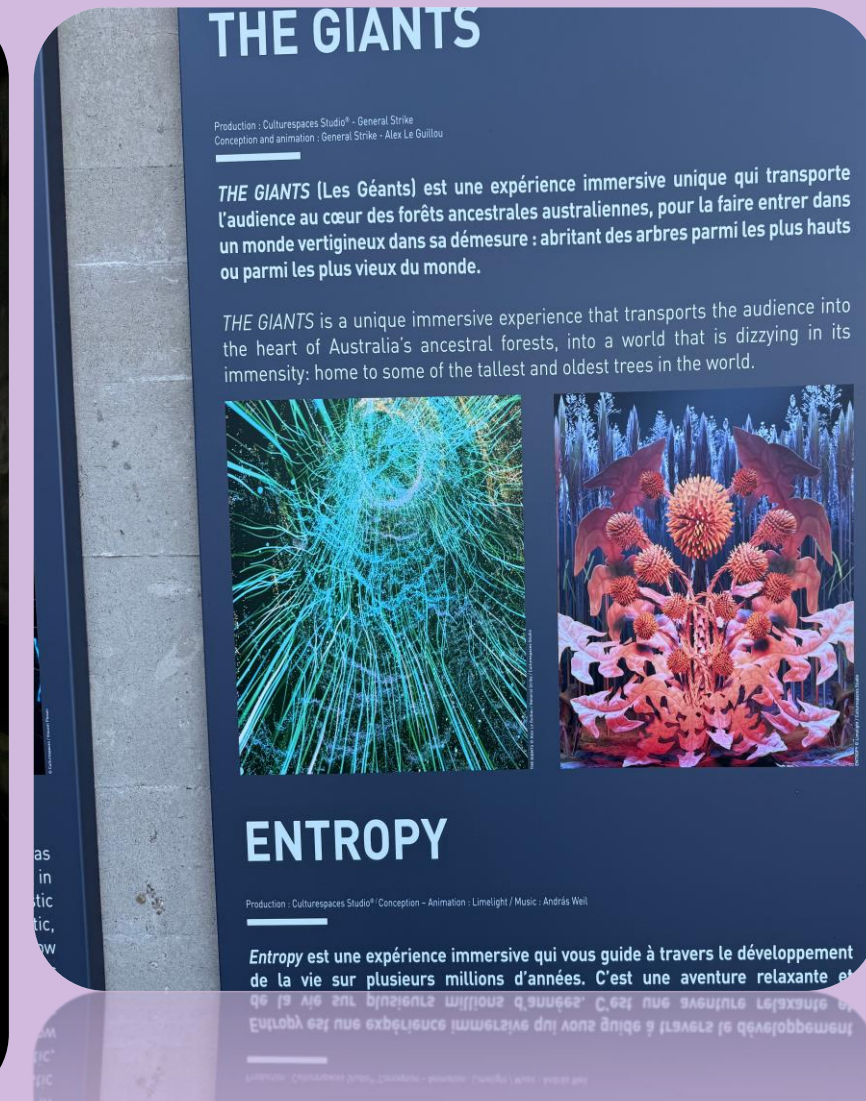
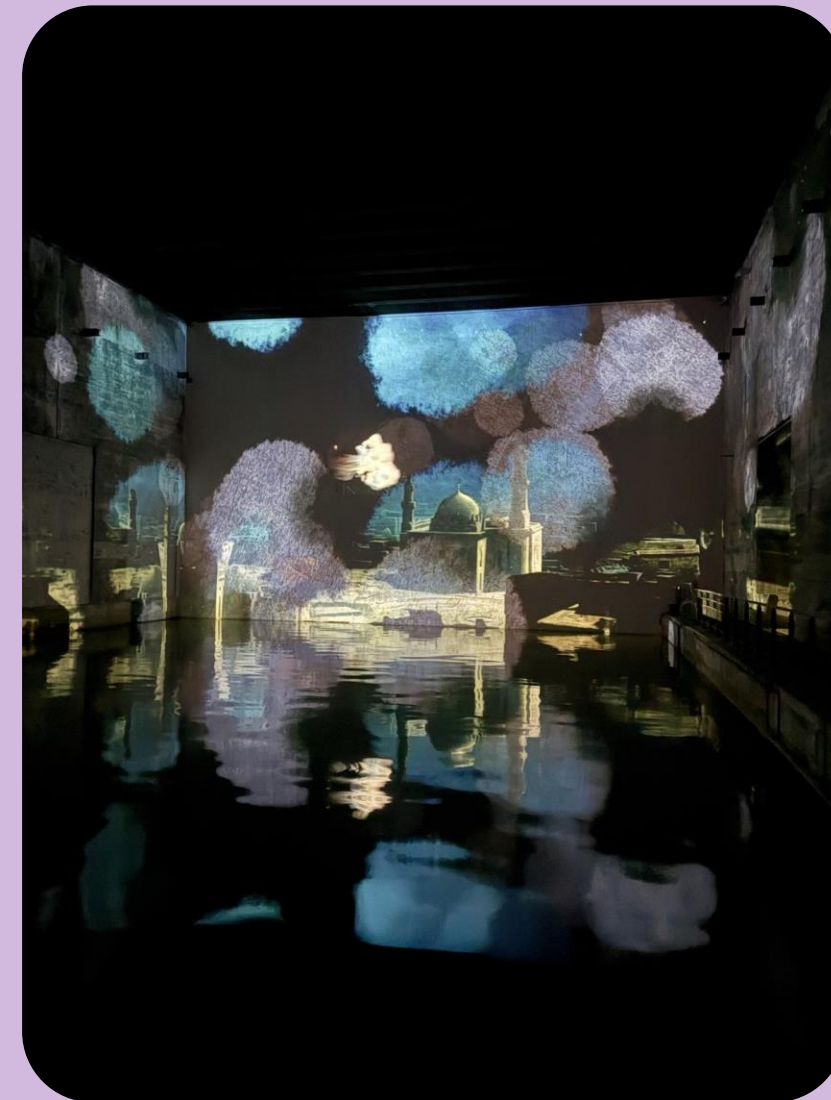
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# Sustainability Measures

## Resource Preservation:

- Repurposes existing infrastructure, avoiding new construction and minimizing material waste
- Uses energy-efficient lighting and AV systems designed to suit the cavernous, water-filled environment
- Demonstrates a model of adaptive reuse that can inspire other cities to regenerate derelict or industrial sites with minimal environmental impact



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# Community Involvement

Bassins de Lumières reflects a powerful model of **community reactivation through cultural transformation**. Its repurposing of a dormant military site into a cultural space generates **social value and civic pride**, while broadening access to artistic experiences.

## Local Access and Cultural Participation

- Provides an **accessible, non-traditional art venue** that welcomes a broader public than typical museums
- Regularly attracts local families, schools, and community groups — especially through immersive, multi-sensory programming
- Lowers psychological and cultural barriers by offering approachable, emotion-led art experiences

## Urban Renewal and Community Identity

- **Revitalizes** a once-abandoned, historically sensitive area — transforming a symbol of occupation into a space of public gathering and artistic celebration
- **Reinforces** collective ownership of memory, turning a space once hidden or feared into a civic and cultural landmark

## Educational and Generational Reach

- Exhibitions often feature **thematic storytelling** (e.g. Klimt, Dalí, contemporary digital creators) that appeal across generations
- Serves as a resource for **schools, educators, and cultural mediators**, enabling inclusive cultural education outside formal institutions

## Indirect Local Benefit

- Supports surrounding neighborhoods through **increased foot traffic** and **local spending**
- Creates **indirect employment** in hospitality, logistics and cultural services connected to the venue

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# Monitoring, Evaluation and Financing

## Monitoring and Evaluation:

- The immersive exhibitions are evaluated through visitor feedback, ticketing data, and attendance trends, which guide programming decisions and timing
- Cultural impact is assessed qualitatively through media coverage, educational engagement, and audience diversity
- The venue maintains performance standards across visual, sound, and visitor experience, monitored by the managing operator (Culturespaces)
- Annual programming adjustments reflect audience demand and operational feedback, including seasonal timing, thematic focus, and ticket bundling

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# Monitoring, Evaluation and Financing

## Funding and Financial Structure

The development of the Bassins de Lumières was spearheaded by Culturespaces, a private company specializing in the management of cultural sites and immersive exhibitions. The project was realized through a public-private partnership with the City of Bordeaux, which granted Culturespaces a concession to operate four of the submarine base's eleven cells. The total investment for the project was approximately €10 million, covering the renovation of the space and the installation of state-of-the-art digital projection and sound equipment.

Culturespaces financed the project through a combination of private investment and revenue generated from ticket sales, events, and partnerships. The company operates the venue independently, bearing the operational costs and retaining the profits, while the City of Bordeaux benefits from the revitalization of a historical site and increased cultural tourism.

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# Replicability and Scalability

## What makes it replicable?

- Adaptive reuse of existing buildings (e.g. bunkers, warehouses, train stations) minimizes environmental impact and construction costs
- Immersive digital exhibitions can be tailored to fit a range of scales and spaces, from regional art centers to mobile installations
- Public-private operating model balances financial sustainability with cultural mission, transferable to other cities with heritage sites
- Emotional, experience-based programming resonates across cultures, making the content widely adaptable

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# Replicability and Scalability

## Where and how can it be scaled?

- In cities with difficult heritage sites (e.g. military bases, prisons, industrial zones) seeking ethical reuse
- In regions with limited access to contemporary or digital art, where sensory-driven exhibitions can engage new audiences
- By starting with modular projections or touring formats, allowing gradual expansion of immersive art capacity
- Through replicable partnerships, where municipalities provide space and operators (public or private) bring in expertise

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# Key Conclusions & Takeaways

## **Historic reuse as a cultural asset:**

The project transforms the WWII U-Boot-Bunker — once a Nazi submarine base — into a vibrant cultural venue, preserving its architecture while redefining its purpose.

## **Innovative use of digital technology:**

With 90 video projectors and 100km of optical fibre, Bassins de Lumières offers a state-of-the-art immersive art experience that engages all ages.

## **Strong alignment with sustainability principles:**

The site avoids new construction by repurposing existing infrastructure, reduces its environmental impact with energy-efficient systems, and revitalizes a neglected space.

## **Public-private collaboration as an enabler:**

The partnership between Culturespaces and the City of Bordeaux showcases a scalable model where private investment aligns with public heritage goals.

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# Key Conclusions & Takeaways

## **Economic and cultural regeneration:**

The centre draws significant visitor traffic, boosts local economic activity, and supports Bordeaux's positioning as a cultural destination beyond traditional wine tourism.

## **Model of memory transformation:**

Rather than erasing difficult history, the project reframes it through art — turning a symbol of war into a place for reflection, creativity, and peace.

## **High transferability potential:**

This model is particularly suitable for other European cities with large, underused industrial or military heritage sites looking to develop sustainable cultural tourism.

## **Ongoing development:**

Only part of the 41,000 m<sup>2</sup> site is currently in use, with further expansion planned to create a comprehensive arts and creative industries complex — demonstrating long-term vision and growth potential.

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