
OPENING EXCEPTIONAL HOUSES TO COMMON PEOPLE

An evaluation of the
Open House Europe initiative

THIS REPORT WAS PREPARED BY:

Dr. Tadas Šarūnas (Project leader)
Rūta Sventickytė (Researcher)

James Nixon (Editing and copywriting)
Živilė Etevičiūtė (Copywriting)
Naglis Autukas (Fieldwork assistant)
Smiltė Volkovaitė (Fieldwork assistant)
Karolis Rūkas (Graphic design)

THE REPORT WAS PREPARED FOR:



This report is the result of consultancy services carried out under the service contract NR.P-OHE-2023-10-NS signed on 17 October 2023 between VšĮ Architektūros fondas and MB Nepriklausomi sociologai.

Published by MB Nepriklausomi sociologai. Vilnius. 2025.

ISBN: 978-609-96603-0-1

© Copyright VšĮ Architektūros fondas.

HC
EURC

Open House *noun*

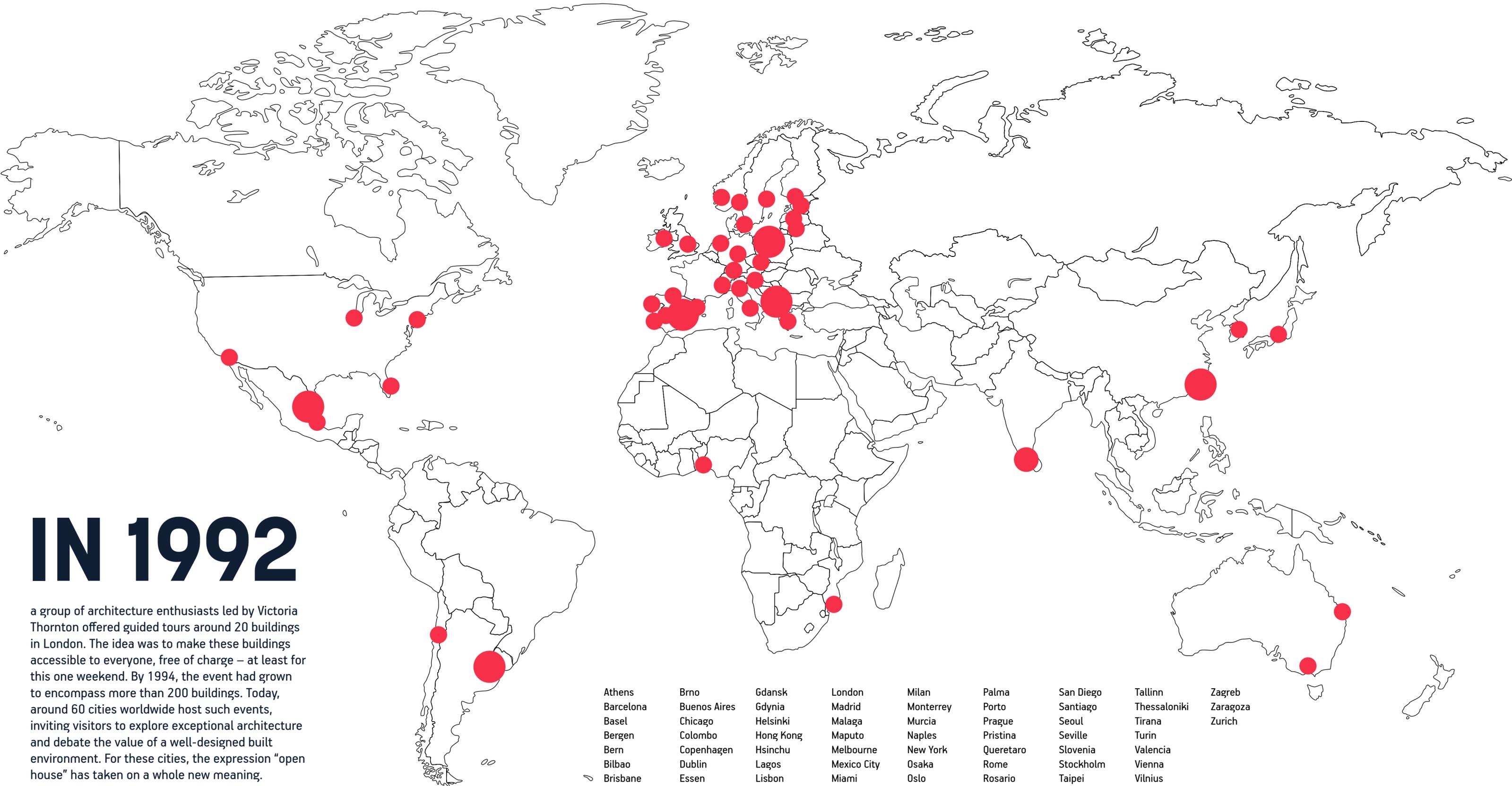
- 1: ready and usually informal hospitality or entertainment for all comers
- 2: a house or apartment open for inspection especially by prospective buyers or tenants

Merriam-Webster dictionary

open house party: a party that whoever wants to come is allowed to. An optimistic idea, but not always a smart one.

urbandictionary.com

DPEN
DUSE
DPE



IN 1992

a group of architecture enthusiasts led by Victoria Thornton offered guided tours around 20 buildings in London. The idea was to make these buildings accessible to everyone, free of charge – at least for this one weekend. By 1994, the event had grown to encompass more than 200 buildings. Today, around 60 cities worldwide host such events, inviting visitors to explore exceptional architecture and debate the value of a well-designed built environment. For these cities, the expression “open house” has taken on a whole new meaning.

- | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------|--------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|--------------|----------|
| Athens | Brno | Gdansk | London | Milan | Palma | San Diego | Tallinn | Zagreb |
| Barcelona | Buenos Aires | Gdynia | Madrid | Monterrey | Porto | Santiago | Thessaloniki | Zaragoza |
| Basel | Chicago | Helsinki | Malaga | Murcia | Prague | Seoul | Tirana | Zurich |
| Bergen | Colombo | Hong Kong | Maputo | Naples | Pristina | Seville | Turin | |
| Bern | Copenhagen | Hsinchu | Melbourne | New York | Queretaro | Slovenia | Valencia | |
| Bilbao | Dublin | Lagos | Mexico City | Osaka | Rome | Stockholm | Vienna | |
| Brisbane | Essen | Lisbon | Miami | Oslo | Rosario | Taipei | Vilnius | |

**THE
ESSENCE
OF OUR
WORK**

To understand the essence of Open House events – and the story of this report – one must contemplate the primary thing that all of these festivals taking place around Europe and the world have in common. This is the act of opening exceptional houses or places up to common people. Festivals in different countries may differ significantly in terms of their size, curatorial concepts and the professional and ideological stances of their organisers. But the core of their practice remains the same – what drives them all is the opening of spaces. They believe that access to previously closed spaces initiates reflections on the quality of living environments and urban space. Our role, as external evaluators of the Open House Europe initiative, is to observe how the efforts of organisers, driven by such beliefs, translate into realities of the visitors and volunteers who participate in these events:

*...helping them gain new perspectives
on local surroundings and inviting
them to envision the shared future
of European architecture.*

(from project documentation)

This is how partners in the Open House Europe project understand the essence of their daily work. Meanwhile, our main task as evaluators has been to provide insights about impacts of this collaboration, as well as the benefits in terms of knowledge exchange that arise from this cooperation. For us, the deceptive sense of simplicity at the core of Open House practice – the opening of spaces – is the very thing that has made this task a challenging one, but also one that is very fun and professionally stimulating.

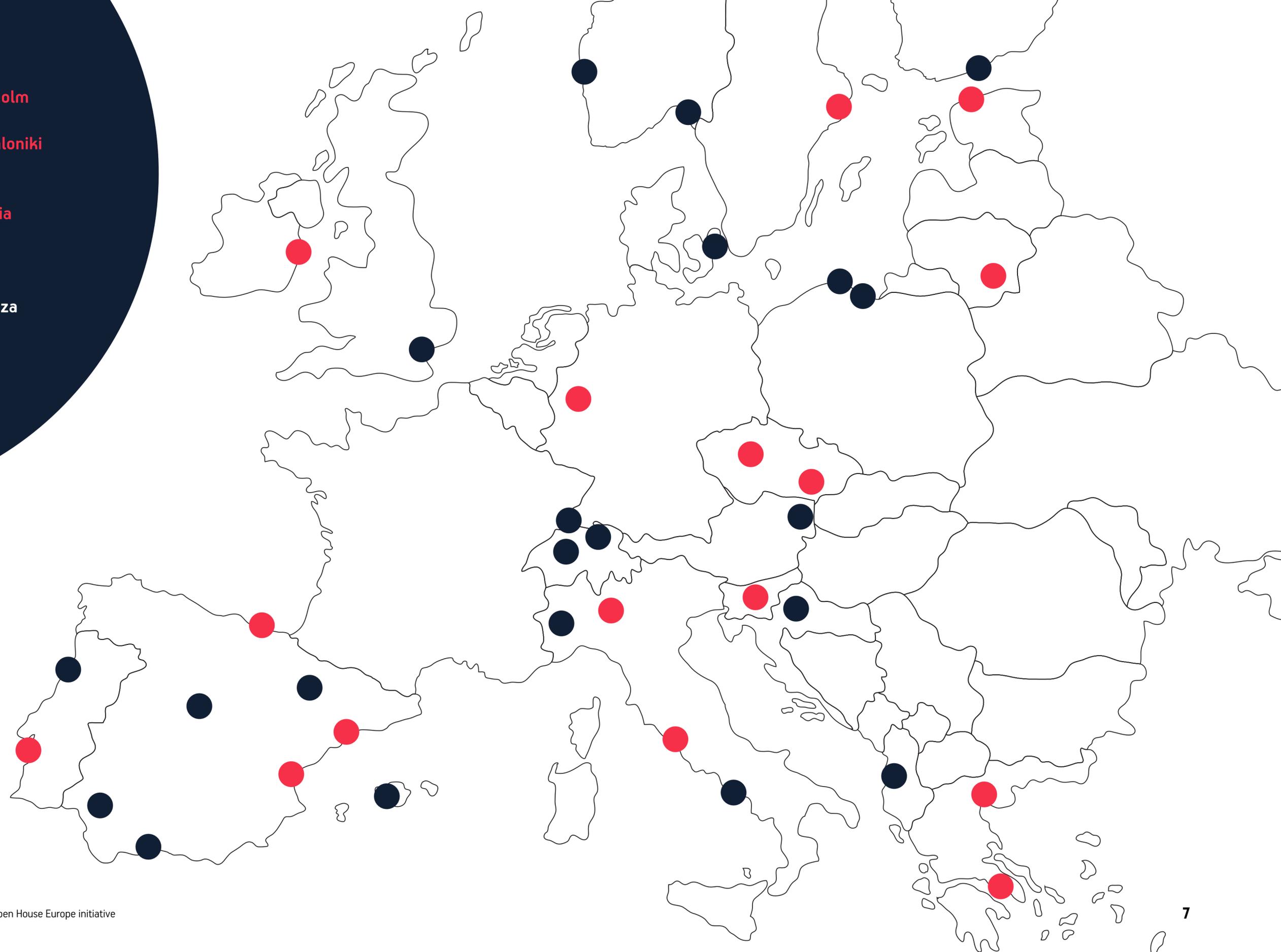
In this research, we could have crafted a story about the project following the well-trodden path of reaping the usual benefits of European exchange. But the primary activity of Open House practice invites a more engaging and, we believe, more important story. Opening up a space to a stranger disrupts the key dichotomy employed in the social production of urban space. This dichotomy is that of the “private” and the “public”; the “open” or the “closed”. This disruptive element prompts us to look at Open House practices as we would look at certain counter-cultural activities. Indeed, Open House events often open up spaces that are otherwise accessible only to people of higher socioeconomic status, or to people from certain cultural and professional groups. Open House practice thus functions almost like a micro-dose of squatting. By disrupting the common social norms that determine how a space is used, Open House invites us to speak about our common life in the city and to touch upon questions that are important to very many people. Thus, we invite to turn the page and listen to what the experiences of Open House Europe can tell you.



Photo by Anastasia Angeli. Courtesy of Open House Greece.

- Athens
- Barcelona
- Basel
- Bergen
- Bern
- Bilbao
- Brno
- Copenhagen
- Dublin
- Essen
- Gdansk
- Gdynia
- Helsinki
- Lisbon
- London
- Madrid
- Malaga
- Milan
- Naples
- Oslo
- Palma
- Porto
- Prague
- Rome
- Seville
- Slovenia
- Stockholm
- Tallinn
- Thessaloniki
- Tirana
- Turin
- Valencia
- Vienna
- Vilnius
- Zagreb
- Zaragoza
- Zurich

● Part of Open House Europe



The Open House Europe network was brought together in the year 2022, and currently connects professionals in 16 participating cities. All participating cities organise festivals that offer direct experiences of architecture to the public free of charge. They usually also include parallel lectures, discussions, performances and other activities.

By joining Open House Europe, partners commit to participating in common actions and covering commonly coordinated topics. The network seeks to foster a more inclusive debate about architecture as a shared European identity, bringing the values of quality spaces to the general public and empowering citizens to advocate for a well-designed built environment.

LOOKING BEYOND THE **EXCITEMENT** OF VISITORS

The research and evaluation of cultural initiatives is a tricky endeavour. This is not the field in which the naked presentation of standard, measurable outcomes would do justice to the amount of effort that organisers devote to their work and the social impact they achieve. Open House events are loved by people. They are loved just like most other cultural activities that manage to survive the immense competition of cultural life in European cities. Yet these tours are accompanied by a specific kind of excitement among visitors, sparked by gaining exclusive access to exceptional architecture and urban spaces. The more exclusive it is to access a given building or space, the more the stunning the experience of the tour might seem. But a skilful curator can achieve this sense of exclusivity even in very ordinary public spaces, such as museums or public service buildings, by opening up previously inaccessible corners of these spaces, providing free access to what is otherwise a paid entrance space or curating a unique tour experience.

...there was also a moment when a family was passing by. And I think they just didn't know about Open House. So, they were passing by, and they were like – 'Oh it's open! We can go in!' So, you could see there had been times when they had wanted to get in, but it was impossible. They were just racing to see what was behind these walls. So, people are really happy that they can get into the place they know. They say, 'Oh, I wanted to go there, but I couldn't usually do it' or 'I didn't even know what was there.'

(festival organiser)



Photo by Luca Rotondo. Courtesy of Open House Milano.



Photo by Luca Rotondo. Courtesy of Open House Milano.

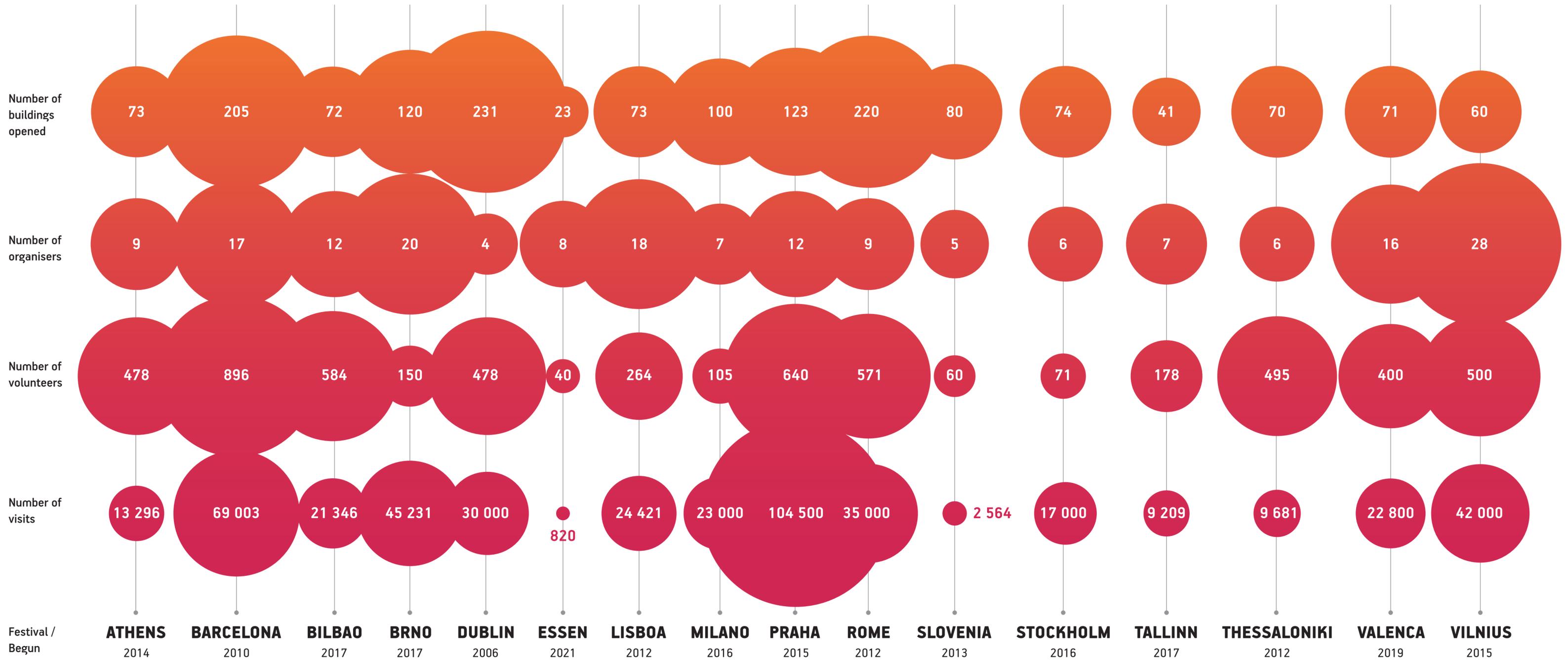
This simple but recurring recollection of joy captures what the festival set-up brings to visitors. It comes from a basic human need to play with power and boundaries. Some might say visitors' satisfaction comes from certain "voyeuristic" tendencies of humans. A perfect example of a tour that brings joy at "breaking into" a much desired but usually inaccessible space would be a visit organised by OH Milano to the Pirelli Tower, commonly known as the Pirellone.

This skyscraper, designed by Gio Ponti with Pier Luigi Nervi and Arturo Danusso, was completed in 1960. Its recognisable silhouette dominates Milan's skyline and symbolises both Italy's post-war economic boom and the revival of the country's spirit of innovation and progress. After its completion, the tower quickly became a symbol of modern Italy, reflecting Milan's transformation into a hub of industry, finance and design. Since 1978, the Pirelli Tower has served as the seat of the Regional Council of Lombardy. Beyond this function, however, the building embodies Milan's identity as a city of innovation, efficiency and contemporary design. For the people of Milan, the Pirelli Tower is more than just a skyscraper – it is a cultural icon.

Standing 127 metres tall with 31 floors, the Pirelli Tower was among the tallest buildings in Europe at the time of its completion. Its slender, aerodynamic form and innovative use of reinforced concrete and glass represent a milestone in modern architecture. The building's elegant diamond-shaped plan gives it both stability and a distinctive aesthetic lightness. As a governmental building with strict security protocols, access to the interiors of the *Pirellone* is restricted. OH Milano opens the building up to lay citizens, providing one of the rare occasions to access this signature building.

Throughout this report, we reveal the great diversity in the forms that this seemingly simple act of opening takes in various cities and spaces. These differences are also an outcome of the partner festivals being created by very different organisations. Each of these operates in a very different social context and deals with challenges that arise at very different stages in their development, from young festivals, such as OH Essen, to long-established ones such as OH Dublin. From the boutique experiences of OH Slovenia, to the festive mood of the crowd at OH Athens. From the lean teams of staff and volunteers at OH Stockholm, to the major mobilisation of human capital at OH Barcelona. These and other contrasts are also the sources of the benefits that OH Europe can bring to partners of the project.

A selection of indicators for the year 2025, showing the differences between OH festivals:



OH Europe is a cooperation project

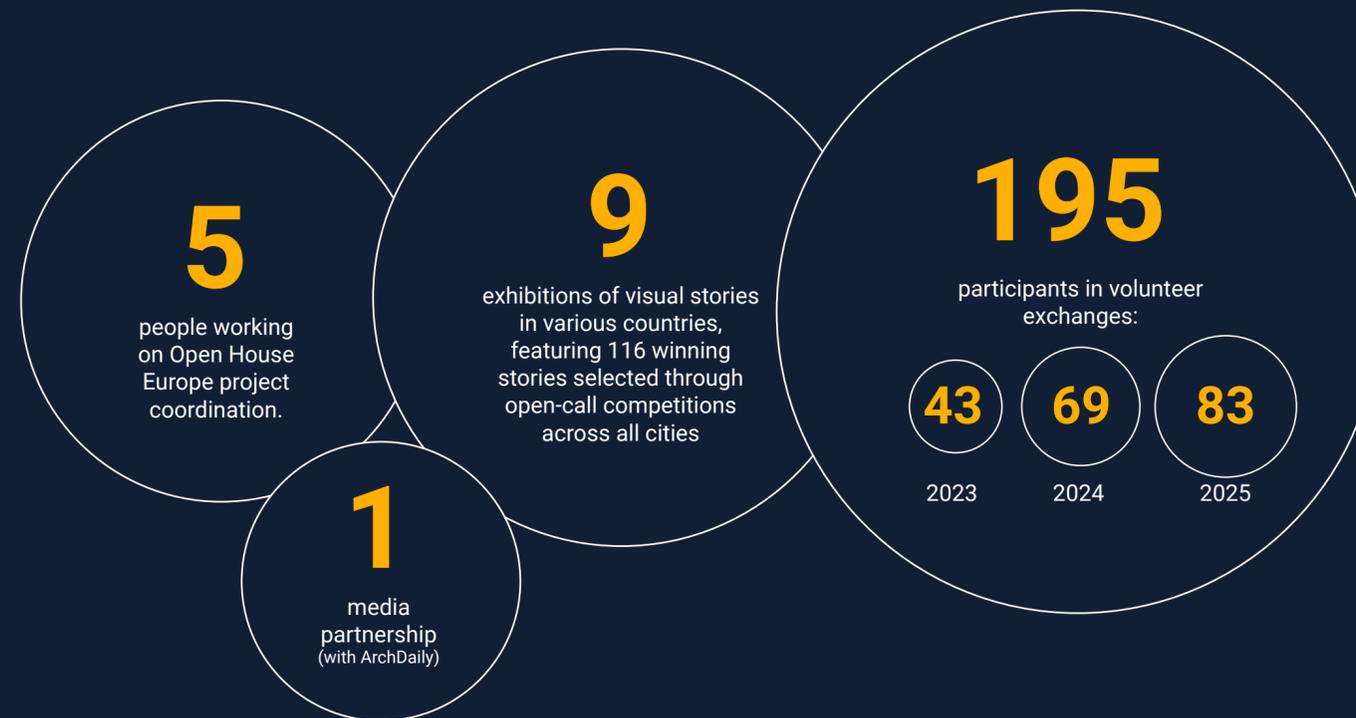
It brings together different Open House festival organisers across Europe, enabling them to collaborate and engage in knowledge exchange. The main tools used to connect local festivals are various **meetings** between partner organisations, as well as **annual themes**.

OH EUROPE

Every year, OH Europe launches an international open call for **visual stories**, encouraging participants to share their views about architecture and to reflect on the annual theme through photography, film, drawing and other visual art forms. The **visual stories** selected become an exhibition, which travels around Europe to various OH Europe partner organisations. The selected works also feature in a printed publication and online.



Throughout the year, various local Open House events across Europe respond to a common **annual theme** by highlighting relevant buildings through the local Open House festival programme or hosting other activities that relate to the **annual theme**. This offers an important way to address contemporary challenges in civil society and at a planetary level, in line with the values of the New European Bauhaus initiative.



The **annual summit** is a gathering of the Open House community, along with architecture enthusiasts and professionals. Each summit, held in one of the partner cities, features a dynamic public programme including inspiring discussions, lectures, workshops and guided tours. These summits provide a unique opportunity for the OH community – including anyone planning to launch an Open House festival in their city – to come together, learn, exchange knowledge and share experiences.

OPEN HOUSE

To encourage the exchange of knowledge and experiences, OH Europe facilitates **volunteer exchanges** between partner organisations. This exchange programme is dedicated to facilitating international learning and collaboration among European cities and OH Europe partners.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is intended for a wide range of audiences. It allows citizens of OH Europe partner cities to find out more about the specificities of the festivals in their own cities. These are reflected in the case studies, which cover various cities participating in OH Europe. Meanwhile, cultural professionals will be interested to see how OH festivals have explored and engaged their audiences. For volunteers involved in OH festivals, this report will provide reassurance about the multiple challenges to their work – and the value it creates. Professionals in the fields of architecture and urban design are invited to reflect on ways to explain the meaning of their profession to fellow citizens.

No matter which angle you approach it from, the main building blocks of this report are the evaluation statements we have arrived at through our research. In the first chapter, we present the impacts that derive from the benefits OH Europe provides to its partners at a more operational level, such as:

- **Helping with strategies to mobilise festival volunteers**
- **Inviting critical assessment of the audiences they reach**
- **Gathering together European citizens who are interested in architecture and the urban environment**

The second chapter of the report reflects on the impacts that this knowledge sharing has brought to partners, namely:

- **Committing to the democratisation of architecture**
- **Encouraging them to engage with the politics of space**
- **Strengthening solidarity within the architectural profession**

Casual readers who may not have time for a full read are invited to click on any of the above point to read our thoughts on the related topics. In these times of constant information overload, this type of reading may appeal a casual audience – but cultural professionals who are involved in creation of Open House festivals or similar projects are urged to read the report in its entirety. This will enable you to reflect deeply on the final chapter of the report, which contains our recommendations as to the directions that the OH Europe initiative could or should take further.

The narrative of this evaluation invites you to look beyond the excitement of visitors to OH festivals. This would not be possible without our strong commitment to gathering the facts, which we have maintained throughout the implementation of this research.

Photo by Hugo David. Courtesy of Lisbon Architecture Triennale.



Some *impressions* of Open House events from volunteers

"I realised that I enjoy events like Open House, which open doors to otherwise inaccessible spaces and help to create a greater sense of belonging to the city and its buildings. They also give you a feeling of uniqueness, as you get to look 'under the hood'."

(woman aged 35–44 years, working in a profession not related to architecture, from Prague)

"It showed the complexity of urban stories that we are not sufficiently aware of."

(woman aged 18–24 years at OH Slovenia, studying in a field not related to architecture)

"I'm a fan."

(woman aged 45–54 years at OH Athen, working as an architect or landscape architect)

"It was a really interesting experience, and it made me realise how interconnected the story of this building is to the history of the state."

(man aged 18–24 years at OH Tallinn)

"Thank you very much for organising. It has been fascinating to explore the hidden gems Brno has, and see the city from different perspective."

(man aged 25–34 years at OH Brno, working in a profession not related to architecture)



(man aged 35–44 from Tallinn)

"A great event, but the lines are very long, which shows that people like it."

(woman aged 55–64 years at OH Vilnius)

"I was completely blown away. I'm not an expert, but I think it's a brilliantly designed and executed building, both in terms of architecture, furnishings and exterior. Congratulations to the owners and the architect!"

(woman aged 55–64 years at OH Slovenia, Ljubljana)

"It's great that it exists!"

(visitor to OH Stockholm)

"Unfortunately, some popular screenings were fully booked too quickly."

(visitor to OH Stockholm)

"I felt like I was back in elementary school, which I really enjoyed."

(woman aged 18–24 years at OH Milan)

COMMITTED TO **FACTS**

As we will quickly see, OH events induce a special excitement among the residents of the cities in which these festivals take place. The contrasts in experience and social contexts, as well as the very different approaches taken to the same format of cultural event, have provided the low-hanging fruits of knowledge exchange that have been harvested over the three years of this initiative. From our standpoint, however, these fruits alone are not sufficient evidence to support the social impacts of the OH Europe initiative itself. After all, the stated aim of the members of this professional community is to go beyond the simple satisfaction of visitors or the exchange of knowledge between organisers trying to achieve this satisfaction. Visitors' satisfaction with their experience is just a means to a greater end – involving lay citizens in a debate about architecture and city life. Through their hard work, individual festivals are generating related social impact in their home cities and countries.

Thus, OH Europe works as a multiplier of existing good practices and an accelerator of new ideas. To evaluate the social impacts of the OH Europe initiative, we have sought answers to the following questions:

What are the social impacts of Open House festivals?

How has OH Europe circulated knowledge on the production of such social impacts?

How has OH Europe multiplied these social impacts?

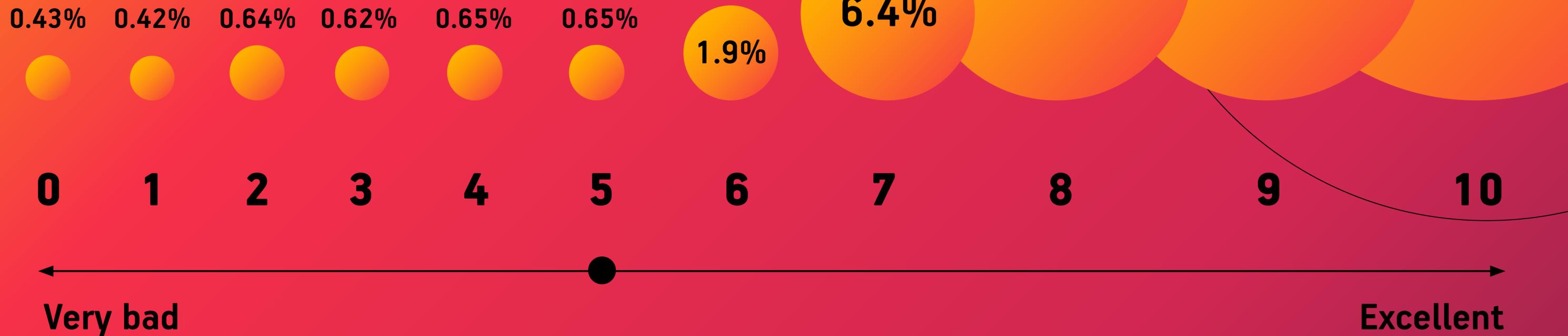
As a function of evaluative applied research, these questions are raised to challenge the value of this initiative. However, this is neither an audit, nor a project report. The main function of this report is to show what social value such interventions have brought to European citizens. By its design, OH Europe is a platform for knowledge exchange, bringing together cultural organisations from across Europe. It does not work with festival audiences directly. As such, the statements made in this evaluation always bear in mind what it is possible to achieve through this type of intervention, within the given time frame and budget. Therefore, when analysing the social impacts of OH Europe, we always refer to the actual activities that have been implemented during the project.

To enable such analysis, which connects the social impacts of Open House festivals with the outputs of this project, we began by carrying out 12 interviews, as well as a focus group with the organisers of these events. Our aim was to understand how the people who know the most about these festivals and their audiences envisage the social impact and the meaning of their work. The qualitative material gathered using these methods was treated more as a reflection of a belief system that helps to mobilise a very challenging cultural venture – scouting dozens of buildings and negotiating with their owners; mobilising and training hundreds of volunteers; and managing the flows of thousands of event participants. While qualitative material is very rich and explanatory, on its own it was not yet sufficient to enable grounded discussions about the actual impacts of the experiences created through the festivals. To enable such discussions, we developed protocols to monitor the experiences of visitors and volunteers, which were to be used by all festival organisers.



Photo by Hugo David. Courtesy of Lisbon Architecture Triennale.

In general, how would you rate this tour?



Note: data from visitor surveys implemented at festivals in cities participating in the OH Europe project. The surveys were implemented in 2024 and 2025. The chart is based on a subset of data (n = 4,797) gathered using a random sampling method. Total survey responses for this question (n = 10,718) across all participating cities include data gathered using on-the-spot sampling and dissemination of the survey via social media or email lists. Full-dataset results for this question: 10 – 36.7%; 9 – 25.6%; 8 – 22.6%; 7 – 9.1%; 6 – 2.7%; 5 – 1.1%; 4 – 0.7%; 3 – 0.7%; 2 – 0.4%; 1 – 0.1%; and 0 – 0.3%.

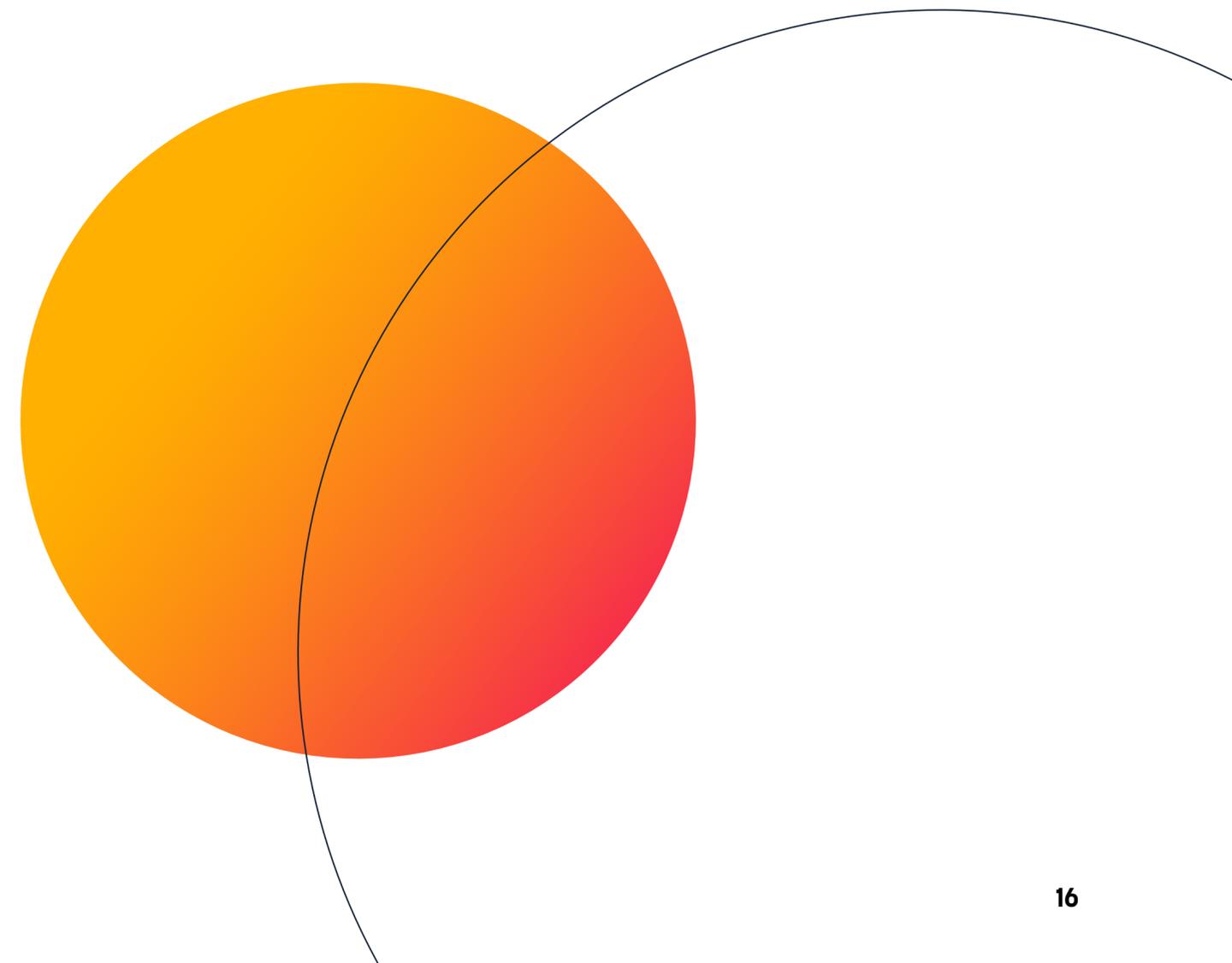
The above survey results from visitors show very positive feedback about OH events. The initiative's affective qualities and open, democratic format drive the popularity of these festivals and lead to a high level of satisfaction among visitors. In its raw form, such feedback cannot enable grounded discussions about the actual impacts of these experiences. Thus, as part of the research process, a common questionnaire structure was designed that helped to summarise the impacts produced by such festivals. This work was carried out in cooperation with project partners. While these questionnaires included a set of common questions across all participating cities, each participating city could add its own unique questions to the standard questionnaire. The surveys touched upon visitors' feelings that emerged during the festivals, as well as deeper impacts on learning and their sense of identification with the city. The questionnaire also included open-ended questions aimed at capturing authentic reflections from visitors and volunteers. Every survey quotation in this report is the authentic voice of a festival visitor or volunteer, and every statistic represents the collective voice of participants. Together, they form a body of evidence through which the meaning and impact of Open House Europe can be more fully understood.

Not only did the evaluation team design the questionnaires; we also helped to implement the surveys. During 2024 and 2025, we received 18,690 responses to visitor surveys, 558 responses from volunteers, and 13 responses from a survey of project partners. This resulted in a total of almost 20,000 responses from people to the various questionnaires. Participation in the monitoring was voluntary – each city could decide whether or not to adopt the tools, and the extent to which they wanted to integrate them into their local evaluation routines. Different cities also chose different approaches to sampling and data collection from responses to their visitor surveys. One approach was random sampling, in which visitors were approached at regular intervals, ensuring the most representative coverage of the overall festival audience. Another was on-the-spot sampling, whereby surveys or QR codes were distributed

directly by volunteers during tours. A third option was to distribute visitor surveys via visitor email lists or social media campaigns. The choice of sampling method was left to each city, and was made on the basis of visitor numbers, volunteer capacity and event logistics. While random sampling was the most demanding approach to implement, it also secured the highest-quality data. Thus, the visual representations of quantitative findings and the interpretations in the report are based on data gathered using this sampling method. The data gathered through these surveys enabled us, as outsiders, to join a discussion about the meaning and impact of the work performed by organisers and volunteers in these events. This ensured the discussion was based on real-world evidence rather than the internal beliefs of the group.

However, the impact of Open House Europe is more than just the quantitative sum of feedback from its audiences. This principle is especially important in the realm of evaluations of cultural interventions. Cultural initiatives are often liked and admired – yet, controversially, many of their actual social values and impacts are overlooked during evaluations. This omission relates to the intrinsic cultural values on which such interventions are built, which can only be fully recognised through qualitative enquiry. To avoid this flaw, we therefore integrated both quantitative and qualitative evidence. Throughout the process of interpreting the data, we maintained constant contact with the participants in the evaluation. For this purpose, we implemented two workshops, during which the organisers of OH Europe were invited to use the outcomes of the interim research to reframe our understanding of the initiative as well as their own narratives of its impacts. We also presented the design of the study and its interim findings at the project's annual events. This allowed us to arrive at evaluation statements that could be supported with facts about impacts, rather than just the beliefs of those involved in creating them. The interactive process detailed above allowed us to build common ownership of the final conclusions that are presented in this report. As professionals, we take quantitative and qualitative evidence of impact seriously. But

still, we have to admit that these are not always as powerful as the personal or “anecdotal” stories of people themselves. Thus, we begin each chapter of our story about the impacts of OH Europe with a personal story of this kind. These are the stories of real people whose lives were touched by Open House events. Speaking without the usual anonymity of a research participant, these people represent the impacts of the OH Europe in the most visible manner possible. Thus, we begin with the story of Dana, who decided to join an Open House festival as volunteer. Let's see where her story takes us...



IMAGINING AN **OPEN** CITY

The background features three overlapping circles of varying sizes and colors. The largest circle on the left is a vibrant yellow-orange. The middle circle is a bright red-orange. The smallest circle on the right is a deep red. The background itself is a solid, light pink color.

I MEET DANA,

I meet Dana Mornealo in Lisbon's Beato Innovation District, area that represents a more contemporary side of Lisbon she especially appreciates. Dana finds its mix of industrial heritage and buzzy, creative energy very inspiring. In the years since she moved to Portugal from Moldova as a teenager, Dana has fallen in love with living in Lisbon. Volunteering for OH Lisboa has been an important part of developing this relationship. This love for her city and her open character makes people like Dana an irreplaceable part of every Open House festival. The very concept of Open House relies on the energy of such volunteers. Imagine: for one weekend – and, in some cases, more than a week – a multitude of private and institutional spaces across a city are open to the public. All free of charge. Such an undertaking would be impossible without the generous support of volunteers like Dana. The act of giving – of time, of labour and human relations – is the reason such festivals are able to happen at all. Each volunteer has their own reasons for extending their generosity to the city they live in and love. For Dana, this act of giving is its own reward:



Photo by Matilde Fieschi.

I feel very, very good after these kinds of weekends, because I know I've done something good for someone. I meet a lot of people. Maybe in everyday life, we will never meet again... but at the festival, we share the same interests and sometimes even the same opinions. After these weekends I feel fulfilled, knowing I've brought someone joy. And it's a pleasure that costs me nothing — I do it with all my soul.

Dana has been fascinated with architecture since her teenage years – so her engagement with OH Lisboa is far from coincidental. It began when Dana was looking for activities to fill her free time. She spotted a call to volunteer for the festival. For Dana, it made perfect sense – spending time with fellow architecture lovers seemed like a great way to enjoy her days off. Even so, Dana was a bit anxious about going for an interview to be selected for volunteering. But within minutes of starting the interview, she breathed a sigh of relief. The atmosphere was relaxed but professional, and she found it easy to relate to the Open House team. She says it felt almost like a meeting of some old companions in an exciting expedition. This filled Dana with even greater motivation to embark on her own journey of opening the city up to other people. Dana describes OH Lisboa as a place where one is not afraid not to know.

It's interesting, because at Open House, always feel comfortable because you can ask questions. And if someone doesn't know, it's not a problem because it's not a test. You don't need to prove you know everything. You just ask other people to get the information.

This atmosphere of trust and a feeling of non-hierarchical relationships was present from the very earliest days of Dana's involvement. OH Lisboa offered the perfect combination of what she craved at that time in her life. She met many wonderful and like-minded people she would have been unlikely to meet otherwise. More importantly, this was a crowd with whom she could share her passion for architecture and further develop her knowledge about the city she loves. The experience of Open House has brought Dana an understanding of the many ways of looking at the same, seemingly mundane aspect of urban life. Volunteering for OH Lisboa has helped her to better appreciate her own values and interests. She has also gained a stronger understanding of the views of others. And on top of these benefits to her personal development, Dana has enjoyed discovering urban spaces she previously knew little about – as well as later opportunities to travel abroad and explore new cultures (more on this later). For someone with her curious personality, this was a real treat. Dana stresses how easy it was to volunteer for Open House and how much satisfaction and joy it has brought her – pleasures for which she has not had to pay a thing.

Volunteering also brought Dana a deep sense of empowerment and connection with the people of the city she loves. The opportunity to open up otherwise closed places in the city is a real privilege, she says – like being able to share a fascinating secret. And as Dana notes, different festivals and buildings reveal their secrets in very different ways:

“ Porto is characterised by the transformation of former industrial and infrastructure areas into cultural and social spaces, as well as its strong connection to contemporary Portuguese architects. So sometimes you say, ‘Knock, knock, knock! Let me come inside and see Álvaro Siza’s vision for this place.’ By contrast, Lisbon is renowned for the way in which historic heritage and modern architecture coexist, revealing the city’s layered identity.

Seeing the faces of people discovering these secrets is another of the pleasures of being an Open House guide. Even when a volunteer is not an expert, they can feel the difference they make when bringing the story of a place to real people. The appreciation received is highly rewarding. As Dana says, bringing joy to other people and making sure everyone is having a great time feels good for her soul:

“ I think one rule for all festivals is... to have a great time... to meet new people and discover something new. OH festivals have different values... But at the same time, they are similar because they all bring together people who love architecture and are curious about the spaces that shape our cities.

All of this joy is brought by OH volunteers. After all, it is they who give the festival its visible presence in the city. They are the people who represent its ideas with their own bodies. With their colourful T-shirts, badges, tote bags or even socks, they contribute to the overall festive atmosphere in the city. Volunteers welcome anyone enticed by this idea of sneaking into a building that's usually hidden from the public eye. They become the allies of visitors in this adventure, accompanying them as they imagine an open city together. Taking on such a role makes Dana very happy:

“ The way you feel after all this festival... When everything is done... you feel so good inside. I think you never feel such a way... [only] after the festivals. It’s worth it.

Photo by Matilde Fieschi.





Photo by Matilde Fieschi.

Since volunteering for OH Lisboa, Dana has been excited to participate in the OH volunteer exchange programme. She was invited to Essen – a place she previously knew nothing about. The local team there was very welcoming and warm-hearted, providing Dana with an authentic and special experience of a new city and a new country. Dana felt that her experience with OH Lisboa acquired a new meaning in Essen. She was able to offer feedback to the organisers of OH Essen and to share her experiences from the festival in her home city. Such exchanges enable volunteers like Dana to become a kind of consultant, helping to develop the festival they visit. This experience added an even greater sense of meaning and importance to her volunteering. But the city of Essen proved a nice surprise, too. Its dark, linear architecture – very different from the colourful urban landscape of Portugal – made an immediate impression on Dana. Work-life balance in Germany was also very appealing to Dana. Her visit encouraged Dana to apply for an Erasmus exchange. She returned to Germany, this time to Aachen. While her six-month exchange was not always easy, Dana calls it the best time of her life. She credits OH Europe with bringing friendships and a new perspective on Germany.

Following her international experience, Dana continues to be an enthusiastic ambassador for the Open House concept. She sees a stark difference between experiencing Open House as a way to explore the city in which you live, and being an OH volunteer in an unknown city. Dana recommends both – and says that visiting cities when there is Open House festival going on is an exciting way to be a tourist. She also recommends getting involved in OH to her friends, insisting that the way to really understand its addictive excitement is to try it. Without such excitement, opening up dozens of buildings over a weekend would be just a beautiful idea. Thanks to the help of many volunteers – managing the flows

of attendees, providing tours, supporting a wide range of other organisational functions – it becomes a reality. Volunteers, Dana says, are the wheels on which the festival relies for the smooth delivery of experiences to visitors. But this group of motivated collaborators is not easy to build. As one of the festival's organisers puts it:

“ We need... 230 volunteers for each edition, which is enormous. And this is an area that is more difficult to work in because [in our country] we don't cultivate this approach in society, of being a volunteer. We don't get involved easily.

The experiences of people like Dana and their willingness to continue their engagement over many years is essential to the survival of OH festivals. This is one of the biggest challenges that festivals face when trying to sustain and grow their operations. In this chapter of the report, we show how the engagement of volunteers is reflected in the overall quality of festivals – and look at how OH Europe has helped to enhance this. Touching upon this challenge also provides an opportunity to explain what it means for a festival to expand its audience, and how festivals contribute to fostering social inclusion in the cities in which they are based.

HELPING TO MOBILISE THE 5,910 STORYTELLERS OF ARCHITECTURE

The most important people making the festivals in OH Europe cities happen are the volunteers, 5,910 of whom were mobilised in 2025. The festivals cannot happen without this help – but attracting volunteers is also a very difficult task. For the residents of OH cities, volunteers are also the people who represent the festivals in person. Since many buildings attract queues of people waiting to enter, the first people to meet members of the public are usually volunteers, in the role of queue managers. These volunteers answer questions, keep order and hand out the stickers used to count visitor numbers. Among many other aspects of knowledge exchange, OH Europe has become a platform for festival organisers to exchange their practices on how to mobilise this crucial support from volunteers. Participation in the network has been an opportunity to learn cross-culturally about possible ways to approach people with the offer of volunteering. It has also helped to share the relationship-building practices developed by each festival. Such exchanges have strengthened the volunteer coordination capacities of its members:

When we started [right after the COVID-19 pandemic], we had really a small, small group of volunteers... I think it was only 20 volunteers. Our team also had to volunteer on the tours. So we really focused on how to grow the community of volunteers. The OH Vilnius festival was a real inspiration for us. We started to implement further gatherings throughout the year. We are also now doing a workshop for volunteers on public speaking. We have also implemented an architectural excursion for our whole team – a kind of team building... Three years later, we are now up to around 80 volunteers. For us is, that's quite a big leap. We're really happy.

(Organiser of the OH Slovenia festival)

Engaging and sustaining a large team is a challenge for small and large festivals alike. But for a festival as small as OH Slovenia, participating in the network opened up a functional space for knowledge that it would otherwise have been hard to develop for a festival of this size. Using this expertise to increase its volunteer numbers opened up a lot of development opportunities for OH Slovenia. Since all OH festivals work under the umbrella of the same franchise, they have common experiences to reflect upon. This has made exchanges between network partners more focused and efficient. The best opportunity to hunt for ideas on how to develop your festival were annual OH Europe summits, where festivals could seek out the ideas most relevant to them. These ideas might simply pop up during the programme or be shared by colleagues during social events. These face-to-face events were important for establishing social relationships, which are an essential part of any attempt to initiate the voluntary exchange of individual know-how between professionals. Once such relationships were established, they could be further developed through online exchanges – in online group meetings as well as individual contacts.

This flexibility to exchange knowledge has changed perceptions of what can be achieved through this celebration of opening up a city to its citizens. For most festivals, however, the fruits of such ideas could only be harvested by mobilising more help from volunteers. OH Slovenia is an example of how a festival managed to systematically acquire knowledge from other festivals in order to develop a more stable relationship with its volunteers. But impactful knowledge exchanges also happened on a smaller scale – usually taking the form of copying concrete practices. Such ideas could include the recognition of “veteran” volunteers who have been with the festival for eight years, or celebrating the success of the

festival with a closing party for volunteers. Such seemingly simple gestures have been copied across cities and have proved very important in strengthening the human bond between the organisers who develop festival ideas and the volunteers who help to deliver them.

At the beginning of this report, we showed how strongly satisfied visitors are with their experience of Open House tours. This satisfaction is built on more than just the fluent delivery of the experience. Despite the specificities in the logistics of these events, evidence from monitoring shows that a significant majority of the participants in OH festivals experienced smooth organisation. Most OH tours go beyond simply providing a pleasant experience – reflected in the fact that more than half of visitors said they were not only satisfied with the smooth delivery of experience, but also surprised by it. Most often, this is the achievement of volunteers, because at most festivals, the guides of the tours are volunteers. These people not only enable access to closed spaces for visitors, but they also learn and tell the stories of these buildings in their role as tour guides. Not all of the volunteers who guide tours have any previous experience or connection with architecture. For them, Open House is a place to develop an appreciation for the architecture they present and to develop their public speaking skills. Quite often, such guides contribute to the content of the tour as co-creators, adding to narrative with their own experiences of the place. The extent to which volunteers are prepared to guide the tour – and enjoy themselves while doing it – contributes greatly to the overall satisfaction of event participants. The fact that more than half of participants leave feeling surprised shows that OH festivals are successful in turning these pleasant experiences into individual adventures.

"How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about this Open House guided tour?"

It was smoothly organised

1.7%

2.2%

8.0%

22.9%

63.8%

1.4%

1

2

3

4

5

Do not know /
Can not answer

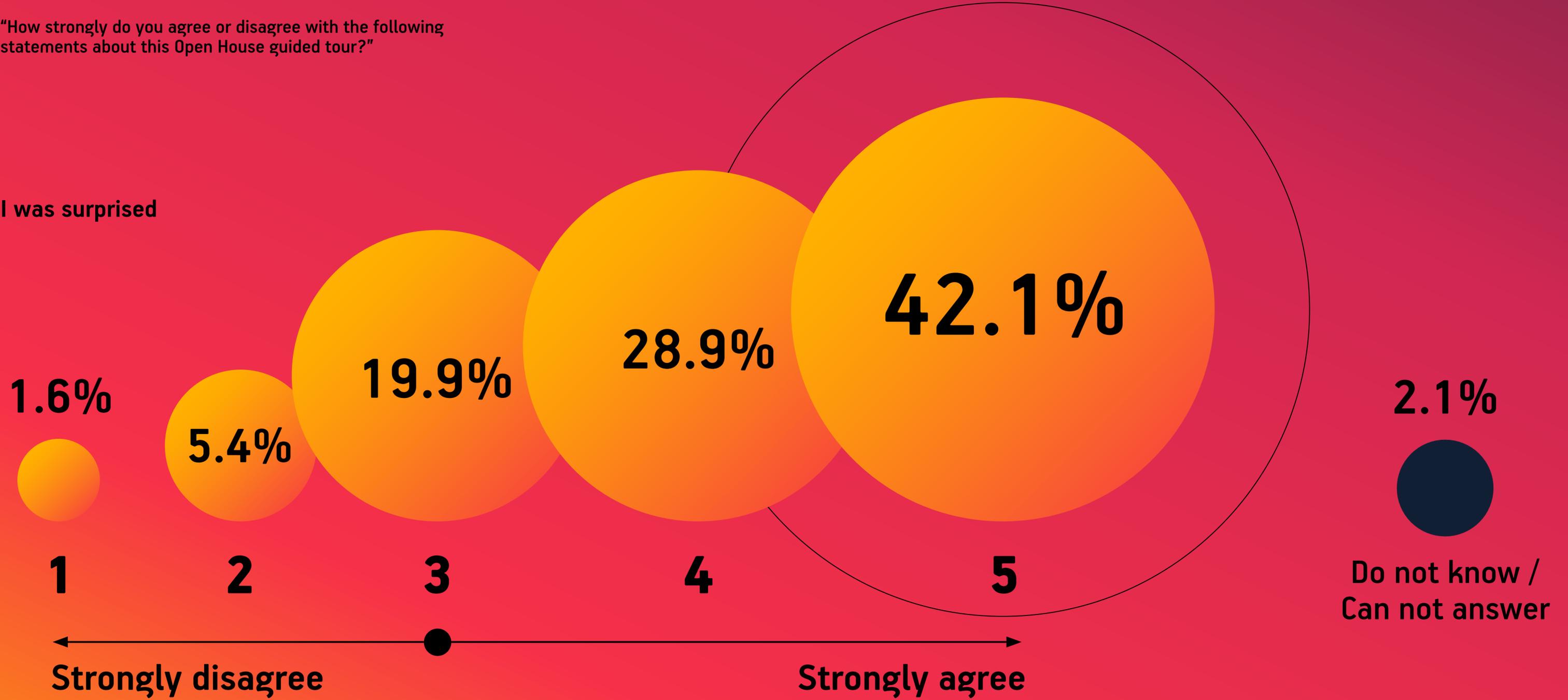
Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

Note: data from visitor surveys implemented at festivals in cities participating in the OH Europe project. The surveys were implemented in 2024 and 2025. The chart is based on a subset of data gathered using a random sampling method (n = 4,900). Total survey responses (n = 11,009) across all participating cities include data gathered using on-the-spot sampling and dissemination of the survey via social media or email lists. Full-dataset results for this question: Strongly disagree – 1.5%; Disagree – 3%; Neither disagree nor agree – 10.3%; Agree – 28.4%; Strongly agree – 55.7%; Do not know/cannot answer – 1.2%.

"How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about this Open House guided tour?"

I was surprised



Note: ddata from visitor surveys implemented at festivals in cities participating in the OH Europe project. The surveys were implemented in 2024 and 2025. The chart is based on a subset of data gathered using a random sampling method (n = 4,853). Total survey responses (n = 10,916) across all participating cities include data gathered using on-the-spot sampling and dissemination of the survey via social media or email lists. Full-dataset results for this question: Strongly disagree – 2.1 %; Disagree – 7.7 %; Neither disagree nor agree – 23.7 %; Agree – 28.3%; Strongly agree – 36.1 %; Do not know/cannot answer – 2.1 %.



Photo by Dusan Vondra. Courtesy of Open House Praha.

The enthusiasm of audiences that is visible from these data would hardly be possible without the enthusiasm of volunteers. While the organisers of the festival implement important tasks in making the festival happen, the number of volunteers a festival attracts is usually 32 times bigger than the core team of the festival. Thus, it is volunteers who magnify the enthusiasm and message of the festival. This asymmetry also means that it is only possible for the social impacts of a festival's messages to be amplified with the help of a stable core of more experienced volunteers who are committed to the social goals of the festival. Quite often, this commitment develops through the special relationships volunteers develop with specific buildings:

The success was, first of all, coming and participating. In fact, I got so involved in the activities that now, when I pass <my> building, I want to go in, because it feels like home when you know so much about it.

(Festival volunteer)

In such cases, volunteers become almost like ambassadors for specific buildings. This enthusiasm relates directly to the values and social messaging of festivals. The enthusiasm of guides contributes to the overall ability of these events to affect the feelings and attitudes of those who attend them. The enthusiasm of these volunteers for architecture and the urban environment is projected back towards visitors. For the curators of festivals, this becomes a tool to inform visitors about highly diverse aspects of the quality of the urban environment. Those festivals that have established such a relationship with volunteers are able to deliver more complex programmes. The tours at such festivals can therefore become more than simple entertainment – they can become building blocks for festival programmes with more ambitious curatorial visions. The possibilities for achieving this depend not only on the know-how of the organisation implementing the festival; they also rely on the commitment of more experienced volunteers. When delivering such programmes, the challenge

is not just to ensure the commitment of such volunteers; their knowledge is also an important success factor – especially when the topics and ideas narrated during the tour are not “easy” to present. While the opening of a popular site can be managed with general enthusiasm, more complex or contested buildings demand volunteers who are both motivated and well prepared. Luckily, individuals often volunteer for Open House for multiple years. As they gain experience, volunteers can start to act as mentors, ensuring that information flows from organisers and helping to build connections – both with the team and with the ideas communicated through the festival. However, this is a technically demanding activity that is not suitable for everyone – raising the challenge of how to further develop the volunteering experiences of those who are not able to become mentors. In the words of one volunteer:

I have mixed feelings. On the one hand, it was fun to contribute something to the festival. On the other hand, for the future, we should keep in mind that ‘veterans’ are perhaps a bit overqualified for such simple positions.

(Festival volunteer)

Prolonged involvement in OH raises a natural question for volunteers: “what is my next step?” One of the key ways in which OH Europe has helped to answer this question is through its volunteer exchange programme. The programme has allowed individuals to participate in OH festivals taking place in other European cities. It has provided a way for them to transfer their volunteering experience outside their own city and culture. Such exchanges have provided a platform to share both experience and passion for this format of cultural event. Furthermore, the opportunity to gain even wider experience of the concept of Open House festivals has been an important additional motivation for volunteers to continue their involvement. In this way, OH Europe has contributed to nurturing relationships with experienced and aspiring volunteers.

Some *impressions* of Open House events from volunteers

"It has made me love and get to know architecture in a lot more depth. It has taught me how to be more comfortable with engaging with people and public speaking, but most of all it has introduced me to some of the best like-minded people in my own country and abroad, and it continues to be one of the yearly events I just can't wait to be a part of again!"

(Woman aged 26 years at OH Slovenia (Ljubljana), working in an interiors/engineering company)

"It very well, non-forcibly introduces quality architecture to a wider audience"

(Man aged 26 years at OH Slovenia, working as an architect/landscape architect)

"Adrenaline, appreciation, joy, excitement."

(Man aged 41 years at OH Brno, working in biomedicine)

"It was a great experience. I would gladly join again. I think it has great meaning and that the event contributes to the cultural, intellectual and educational enrichment of all involved, visitors as well as organisers."

(Woman aged 58 years at OH Brno, working as an external relations specialist)

"This event is a special phenomenon, which not only enlightens society but also connects like-minded people, gives meaning to the identity of a Vilnius citizen. Until next year!"

(Volunteer at OH Vilnius)

"Anxiety, happiness and confidence"

(Woman aged 24 years at OH Thessaloniki, student)

"There is not that much [information about architecture] for the total population. But the festival is about the whole population. <...>. So it's really a nice way and I think the festival is getting a lot of recognition also in the public, in the public view and also in the architectural view, because the biggest architects are hoping to get picked for the festival. So it's not like they have to call everyone and ask them if they would like to participate. They actually want to participate in it, so it has a good recognition."

(Man aged 25 years at OH Slovenia, studying architecture)

"I gained more confidence speaking in public, I felt included in a nice team and I really liked people's willingness to participate in this beautiful experience."

(Woman aged 21 years at OH Athens, studying in a field not related to architecture)

"Social benefit, beauty of architecture, information, meeting new people and strengthening old ties."

(Woman aged 58 years at OH Slovenia)

"I am a political scientist and every time I would find the opportunity, I tried to emphasise this to the audience, to show that you don't have to be an architect or something close to it to participate in this kind of experience. Open House was, for me, the greatest opportunity to get to know more about the Athenian conservatoire, which by chance was close to me."

(Man aged 26 years at OH Slovenia)

AN INVITATION TO CRITICALLY ASSESS THE AUDIENCE BASE REACHED

This part of our story begins with a note that it will be somewhat different from the rest of this report. In this chapter, we discuss the activities of the OH Europe project, which we also helped to implement as service providers. Thus, it would not be ethical for us to make any claims about the direct impacts of OH Europe, as this would partly involve evaluating our own work. However, this dual role also gives us the possibility to share our subjectivities – reflection on which is a key part of the work of researchers. During the course of our research, we have had the opportunity to listen to a lot of stories about how and why people participate in Open House festivals. One of the most beautiful revelations took place during a focus group designed to raise discussions about audience perceptions of the events. In a dimly lit room at the Palácio Sinel de Cordes in Lisbon, the organisers of various festivals sat in a closed circle, almost like a spiritualist séance. When asked to picture the “usual” attendee at their festival and to describe their qualities, people came up with most detailed and colourful descriptions. This exercise exposed a very warm and close relationship with members of their audiences, such as:

...in some characteristics resembling a friend of mine who is very curious – not only to learn about architecture... but also to learn how people live, how they live inside space, how people go outside, how people celebrate, how people create communities.

(festival organiser)

One participant imagined a middle-aged librarian called Ivana, who is also a keen visitor of galleries. For another, the average attendee was Merlin – a slim and very tall old man with long white hair, holding a crystal ball in his long-fingered hands. Someone was surprised to find themselves thinking about a mixture of a friend and the performance artist Marina Abramovic. This attendee looked at you with Abramovic’s signature penetrating looks, known through her performances – thereby signalling their depth of personality and general interest in the quality of art. These instances of imagination also exemplify one of the general challenges faced by the organisers of cultural events. The usual visitor to such events often resembles the organisers themselves. An educated individual, usually with vastly more cultural capital than the average citizen – and, more often than not, female. But what about the others? The OH Europe project helped to re-approach this question by inviting each festival to critically assess the audience base it had reached.

The open format of Open House events enables festival organisers to directly meet the visitors to their events – while they are waiting in line for a tour, or as they exchange questions and share their feelings during it. This also means that festival organisers usually have a strong intuitive understanding of their audiences. But intuition, while a primary

tool in cultural production, also has its own limitations. OH Europe therefore provided partners with monitoring tools to enable an objective assessment of the audience base they had reached. Before OH Europe was launched, some festivals were already implementing visitor surveys. Experience gained from these existing efforts was absorbed and summarised during the project. Standardised survey questionnaires were prepared and shared with the partners. Monitoring guidelines were prepared, suggesting how festivals should develop their monitoring processes – from simple polls disseminated via social media, to advanced monitoring practices using random sampling techniques. In addition, partners received professional support for their attempts to achieve the most representative picture of the audience and their perceptions. Taking such an approach to audience monitoring requires a certain commitment. First, it requires the training and involvement of volunteers, whose help and attention are always in short supply. Second, monitoring procedures are only meaningful if event organisers are ready for the fact that the monitoring data might challenge their own intuitive perceptions about their audiences. Thus, partners of OH Europe used this opportunity, each according to their unique situation.



Photo by Ana Ortiz. Courtesy of Open House Bilbao.

Among the festivals that benefitted most from the support of OH Europe to develop visitor monitoring was OH Vilnius. Starting with almost no previous experience of audience monitoring, OH Vilnius aimed to gain a fully representative picture of its audience and their perceptions. This meant that volunteers had to be trained in how to perform a random sampling of surveyed visitors. The data gathered using this procedure helped to bring long-awaited answers to some important questions. As an example, it provided a precise estimate of the number of visitors to the festival, as previous monitoring had only allowed them to speak about the numbers of tour visits. But the data also brought some surprises. The festival crew had a clear picture of their imagined average attendee –demographically and culturally centring around women in their thirties outside the field of architecture. This view was strongly supported by a simple demographic comparison of festival visitors with a census of Vilnius residents. However, this comparison also revealed the somewhat limited involvement of senior citizens. This confronted the team’s internal belief that the festival was becoming successful at attracting this challenging audience. The initial instinct was to question the data. Thus, in 2025, a dedicated team of volunteers was tasked with performing survey sampling to maximise the quality of the data gathered. This round of audience measurement largely confirmed the same facts. Although OH Vilnius had managed to attract a very committed and loyal base of visitors among elderly citizens, this group remains a largely underrepresented among OH Vilnius visitors. This critical assessment of the audience base reached was directly enabled by the OH Europe project.

The persistence of the Vilnius team in not dismissing those facts that were confronting, but instead engaging with them in order to understand what they meant for the festival’s further development, is also an example of the process that cultural operators need to go through when working with audience monitoring. But the interpretation of such data requires skill, which is rarely available to cultural institutions – even more so for small (and thus often under-equipped) niche festivals.

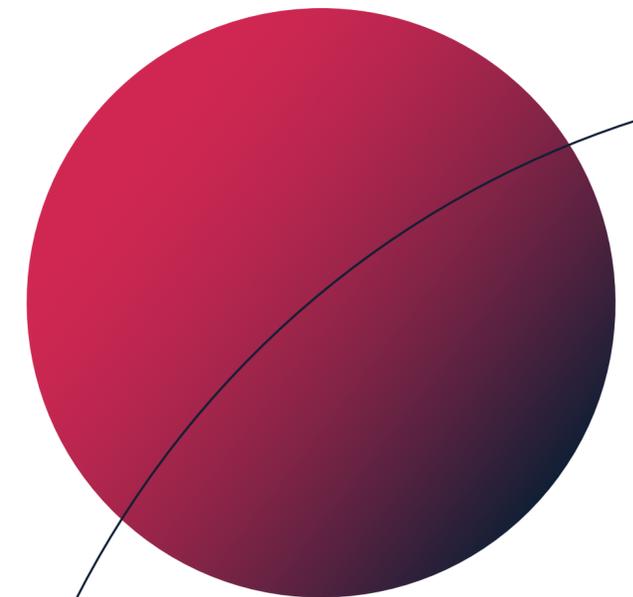


Photo by Photo by Zerikusi. Courtesy of Open House Bilbao.

Such attempts are strongly in line with the values of Open House festivals. But it also requires specific skills and efforts to adapt the substance of the festival's programme to the needs of its youngest visitors. In this respect, OH Europe has again served as a platform for exchange, whereby the organisers of festivals have been able to observe the related achievements of colleagues. One important inspiration has been OH Bilbao. Since its first edition, this festival has included activities specifically addressed towards children, introducing architectural workshops for young audiences. This decision was taken on the basis of a conviction that architecture and the built environment concern the whole of society, including children, who have previously excluded from architectural debates. OH Bilbao has worked to create a space in which children could feel welcomed, involved, and able to explore their curiosity.

Activities for children at OH Bilbao have developed as hands-on workshops adapted to different ages. They encourage observation, creativity and critical thinking through play. By using simple tools and accessible language, the guides for these activities translate architectural concepts into experiences that children can understand and enjoy. The children's programme has been developed in collaboration with architects, educators and cultural mediators, adapting architectural concepts to participants' age and ways of learning. Activities focus on observation, experimentation and imagination, encouraging children to understand how cities, buildings and public spaces are designed and used. For children, these activities have provided an early introduction to architecture and urban culture. For the festival, meanwhile, the children's programme has reinforced the idea that the future of the city is a shared responsibility. Children engage with architectural concepts with curiosity and openness. But they are also a source of inspiration, because they often ask

fundamental questions. By involving them, the festival is not just doing pedagogical work; it is also empowering future citizens who will shape and live in the architecture and the cities of tomorrow. Thinking about the needs of children is just one of the ways in which the environment of OH Europe has helped to initiate reflection about audiences. The project has also offered related training and an audience development plan that suggests a general framework for how each festival could look beyond its existing audience base.



BRINGING TOGETHER EUROPEAN CITIZENS WHO ARE INTERESTED IN ARCHITECTURE AND THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

Festivals are complex undertakings, with human and financial resources often being stretched to the limit. Thus, reaching new audiences can be a challenging task. It requires an honest assessment of who attends, who is missing, and why – all of which can be a somewhat unsettling exploration of a festival's own limitations. But being “open” is embedded into the very name of Open House and in the mottos used by many OH festivals. Often, these festivals are ideologically programmed to aspire towards inclusiveness despite the challenges they face. OH Europe has offered a space in which such identity could be not only strengthened and supported, but also revisited:

But after the festival we organised one year, we were asking ourselves, ‘Do we actually invite all visitors in <our city>?’

(festival organiser)

Such moments of doubt can be experienced by festival organisers facing individual challenges during their journey to inclusivity. But it's easier to deliver on the challenging promises of festival mottos when you know you have a colleague in another country who is willing to share their knowledge. Again, this comes down to the preparation of

volunteers. Guides must bring specialised skills such as sign-language interpretation or accessibility assistance, making architecture and civic spaces open to far more people. The shared reflections show that even experienced festivals benefit from the network's collective experimentation with the tools aimed at increasing inclusivity. One might say more pragmatically that knowledge exchange has made it less costly to aspire to social inclusion – but it has also contributed to the development of a common identity whereby it is seen as an important social commitment:

I think we actually saw materials from Lisbon, and they were doing some tours for people with hearing impairments, and I think that it clicked that this is also a way to attract a new audience.

(festival organiser)

Such a “click” signals that a festival has reached a momentum at which it not only understands the social relevance of practices aimed at nurturing wider inclusion, but also feels ready to embrace the related challenges. Among those festivals that experienced such a tipping point was OH Prague. The festival's team recognised that

their festival, despite its motto “Architecture for Everyone”, did not yet fully include many visitors with disabilities. Such internal self-reflection was sparked by examples from other partners of OH Europe who already had some related experience. Revisiting the promise of their motto, OH Prague began designing and testing tours for people with various forms of disability. As with any cultural organisation taking such a direction, this path involved not only learning about the special needs of certain people, but also facing one's own stereotypes about them. Here, we outline the main elements of what OH Prague did during this journey – and what they learned in the process about the inclusion of particular visitor groups.

TOURS FOR PEOPLE WITH VISUAL DISABILITIES



Photo by Eva Korinkova. Courtesy of Open House Praha.

WHAT OH PRAGUE DID

Developed 3D printed models of buildings in collaboration with students or professionals

Tactile/haptic maps of buildings in a city and its surroundings

Spatially descriptive guiding by trained volunteers

Text-based navigational instructions for blind users on how to get to the tour entrance

A selection of accessible buildings and buildings of tactile interest

WHAT THEY LEARNED

3D models need to be durable and replaceable

Visitors' preferences vary; not all of them like or know how to read touchable models or materials

Volunteers need to avoid the use of patronising language

It is important to realise that total blindness is rare, and variations exist –some visually impaired people may therefore still want to see panoramic views or participate in the whole tour

Announcing tours early allows visitors to plan in advance, allowing them to access any special assistance they may require

Feedback is hard to collect on site, as visitors are often exhausted after the tour

Braille materials were under-used as not many people are able to read it; QR codes and audio materials were more effective

TOURS FOR PEOPLE WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENTS



Photo by Dusan Vondra. Courtesy of Open House Praha.

WHAT OH PRAGUE DID

Czech sign language-interpreted tours as a collaboration with university students. Part of students' final course assessment is the interpretation of the tours at the OHP

Real-time transcription on tablets for non-signers

Promotional videos in Czech sign language

Featured content on deaf-focused national news

WHAT THEY LEARNED

Not all hearing-impaired people use sign language as they may not know it, so alternative tools are important

Visual promotion (such as having sign language in advertising videos) is crucial for outreach

Registration enables targeted follow-up and feedback

GAMES AND WORKSHOPS TO IMPROVE THE RECOGNITION AND INCLUSION OF PEOPLE WITH VARIOUS DISABILITIES



WHAT OH PRAGUE DID

Hands-on accessibility audits, with wheelchair users assessing entries, toilets, signage and interior pathways

Organised workshops for cultural organisers on barriers to accessibility

Encouraged simulation-based learning (e.g. navigating spaces in a wheelchair)

Separate trained volunteer teams for child-friendly tours

Adjusted the language and structure of tours for children

WHAT THEY LEARNED

Even small design details (identifying even single steps, locating disabled toilet access) greatly affect the experience of a visitor in a wheelchair

Learning through embodiment builds empathy and long-term awareness

Participants who are given assistance also generate ideas in real time to improve the festival

Photo by Barbora Polednova. Courtesy of Open House Praha.

The annual theme of the year 2024, “Accessibility and inclusion”, provided both direction and momentum to these efforts. By setting a common focus across the European network, the theme encouraged organisers to work with audience groups who might previously have felt too sensitive or difficult to access. The annual theme was important, but the main motivator for trying out similar practices was inspiration from colleagues. OH Europe activities implemented within the frame of the annual topic of inclusivity sparked an avalanche of related knowledge exchanges. Festivals shared concrete practices on diversifying audiences and tested them in their own contexts. Prague, for example, drew inspiration from the first summit to develop children-for-children tours, and continues to look to Lisbon’s rich programmes for neurodiverse audiences. Vilnius introduced sign-language tours after observing similar initiatives in partner festivals and carefully consulting with the local hearing-impaired community on whether to run these simultaneously with spoken tours or as standalone events. OH Dublin visited Prague and adapted OH Prague’s accessibility strategies, following its step-by-step approach of gaining the trust and confidence of the communities concerned. These are just a few examples that demonstrate how the annual theme has provided both direction and momentum to efforts to improve aspects of festival delivery.

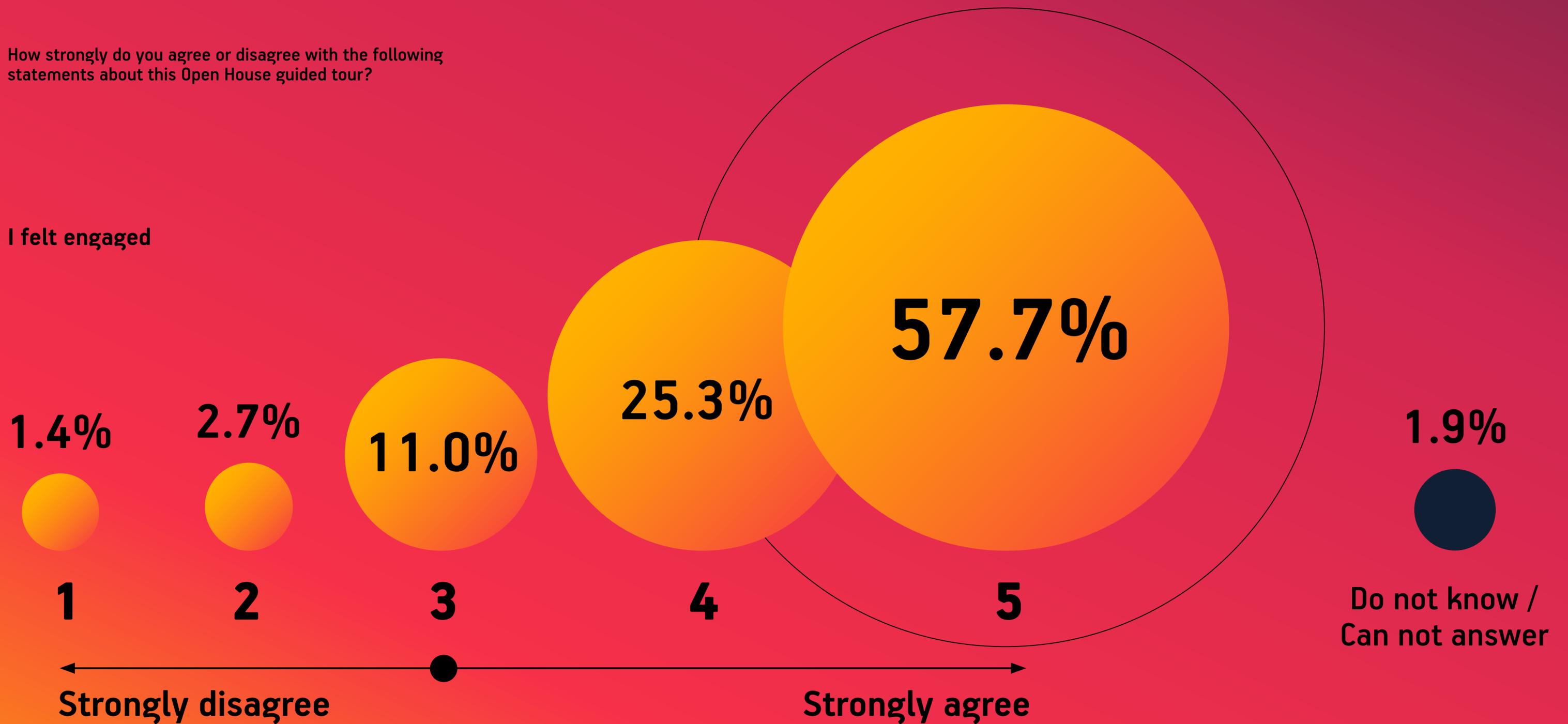
The overall efforts of festivals to engage diverse audiences and provide them with exceptional experiences is widely confirmed by the monitoring data. Around three-quarters of visitors to OH events feel engaged and leave the event with an overall sense that it was an exceptional experience. First and foremost, this is an achievement of the work of volunteers in leading participants through the space, interpreting it and delivering the story of its social meaning. But more importantly, these effects show the ambition and potential of festivals towards achieving a wider societal reach. Positive differences in these effects across disadvantaged educational and occupational groups further suggest that festivals have managed to effectively engage with wider societal groups while still resonating with professional audiences.

Photo by Dusan Vondra. Courtesy of Open House Praha.



How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about this Open House guided tour?

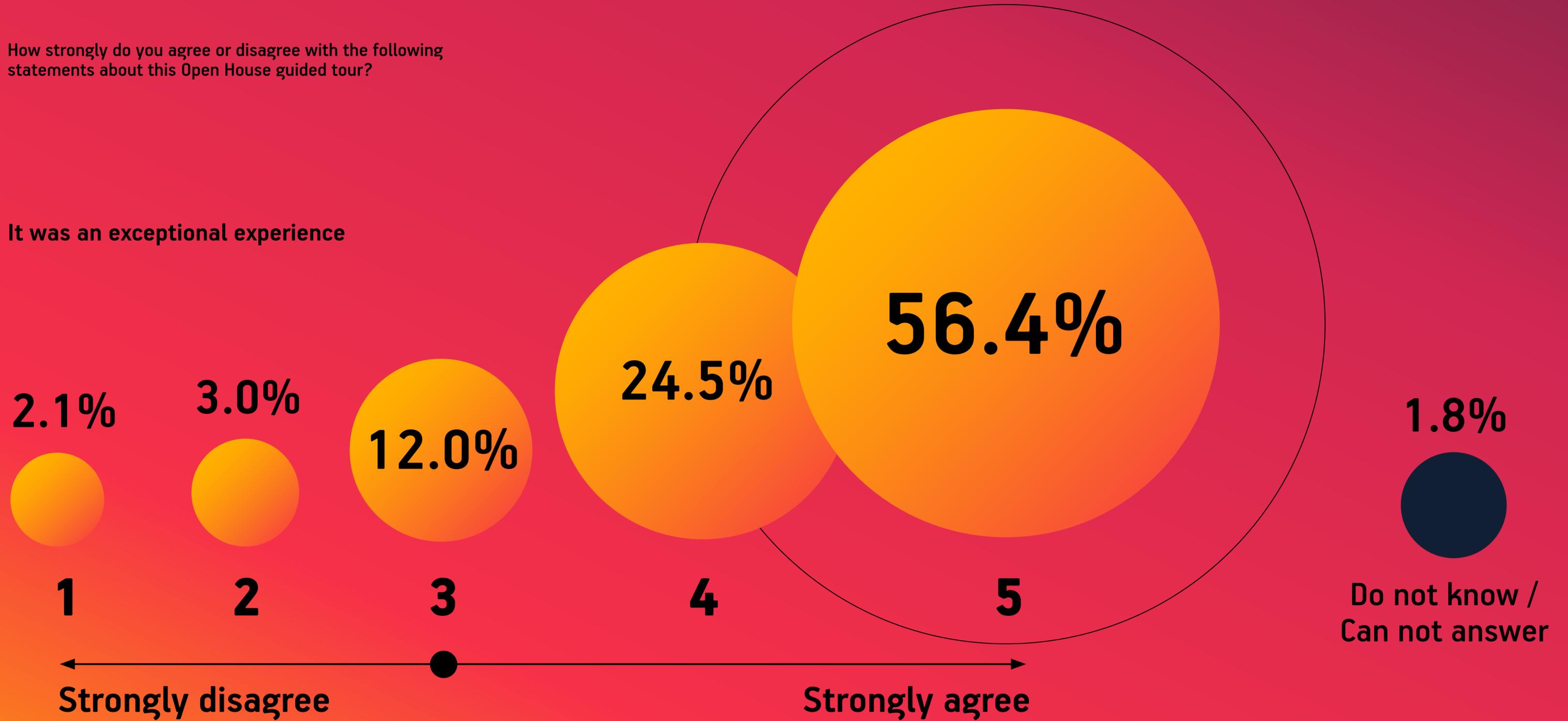
I felt engaged



Note: data from visitor surveys implemented at festivals in cities participating in the OH Europe project. The surveys were implemented in 2024 and 2025. The chart is based on a subset of data gathered using a random sampling method (n = 4,873). Total survey responses (n = 11,009) across all participating cities include data gathered using on-the-spot sampling and dissemination of the survey via social media or email lists. Full-dataset results for this question: Strongly disagree – 1.2 %; Disagree – 2.2 %; Neither disagree nor agree – 8.4 %; Agree – 24.8 %; Strongly agree – 61.6 %; Do not know/cannot answer – 1.8 %.

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about this Open House guided tour?

It was an exceptional experience



Note: data from visitor surveys implemented at festivals in cities participating in the OH Europe project. The surveys were implemented in 2024 and 2025. The chart is based on a subset of data gathered using a random sampling method (n = 4,890). Total survey responses (n = 11,100) across all participating cities include data gathered using on-the-spot sampling and dissemination of the survey via social media or email lists. Full-dataset results for this question: Strongly disagree – 1.6 %; Disagree – 2.6 %; Neither disagree nor agree – 11.1 %; Agree – 26 %; Strongly agree – 57.4%; Do not know/cannot answer – 1.3 %.



Photo by Ravi Sejk. Courtesy of Open House Essen.

The effects that are revealed by this data, when approached by organisers as something more than just the simple effects of exceptional architecture, can be translated into sustained impacts that make citizens more engaged with questions of architecture and urban planning. The OH Europe project, which has brought international exchanges at all levels of festival implementation, has made a specifically European contribution to the impact of citizen involvement. Due to the international nature of the Open House initiative, festivals often play a unique role in intercultural exchange. For people like Dana, volunteering at such events has opened up new opportunities to integrate into city life. This is not an isolated example: even among the organisers of events, there are people who have imported the franchise into their respective cities from abroad – either when returning to their home city or when they moved to a different country. Such individuals repeatedly acknowledge the impact that their involvement with Open House has had on the establishment of new relationships with their city:

So this was a time when I was living alone in a city for the first time. I was getting to know the city [from scratch], not knowing it or not going to kindergarten. Without family. At the beginning, without friends. So for me, there is a bridge between that time and what I'm doing now with Open House – showing the city to other people, getting to know the city, or considering what makes the city like [it is]. Is it architecture? Is it how the buildings are built? What makes the place meaningful for me? What makes it a place where we want to stay?... This festival is a great way to get to know the city for people who are not from here, but also for the people who have lived here forever. And now I'm happy to be part of it."

(Festival organiser)

Just like these personal stories of those who became organisers after beginning their Open House journey as visitors, similar accounts are offered by volunteers. They recount the new knowledge they acquired during their volunteering experience, but also speak about the emotional bonds they developed with particular buildings and neighbourhoods. For newcomers to the city and old-timers alike, gaining rare access to exclusive urban spaces makes them more engaged with their local communities and with the city as a whole. Such accounts show how Open House fosters civic pride, cultural awareness

and urban citizenship. These qualities of the festivals enable organisers to go beyond stories about buildings and to cultivate imaginations of an open city.

This is one of the ambitions of OH Essen, which Dana visited as an exchange volunteer. Much of this city was bombed during the Second World War and rebuilt hastily in its aftermath. Its current day identity is being reshaped in the light of massive migration. The need to transform the function of architecture is evident in many buildings. The festival's aim of social inclusion does not stop at ensuring accessibility for disadvantaged groups, but opens up spaces for initiating dialogue about segregation and urban inequality. Buildings that are considered marginal in their neighbourhoods, and are often also stigmatised or neglected, can become part of the Open House festival. One example of this is a student dormitory tucked behind a high wall – easily missed by passersby, yet rich in its daily atmosphere and social innovation.

People walk past it every day and have no idea it is there. But inside is a whole community – inclusive housing, shared living, affordable rent. That's architecture too. That's the city.

(Festival organiser)

The building itself is modest, but inside lies a vibrant, self-organised community of students. This is a space for shared decision-making, cooperative maintenance and inclusive practices that shape the everyday lives of residents. For many visitors, this collective living is a striking contrast to the isolation often associated with modern housing. OH Essen also draws attention to post-war housing projects, redeveloped industrial sites and community centres such as mosques and worker settlements. Such focus enables it to reveal the forgotten faces and silent stories of the city.

The city's past as a coal mining and industrial hub means that many residents are descendants of migrant workers – particularly from Turkey, Poland and Italy. But the city has also become home to more recent refugees. These groups have often been excluded, both physically and symbolically, from prestigious architectural narratives. One of the efforts made to include more stories from diaspora is the inclusion of a local mosque into the festival's programme. This collaboration did not aim to provide a comprehensive education about Islam, but rather created a shared space for respectful curiosity and dialogue. The mosque, in this context, was presented as an ordinary part of Essen's civic life. For many visitors, it was their first experience of stepping into an Islamic space – a moment that challenged unspoken boundaries in the social geography of the city.

General beliefs regarding the effect of OH events towards the imagination of an open city might be criticised as being too vague or romantically abstract. But it is through such examples and practices, shared by OH Prague, OH Essen and other festivals, that this vision of an open city becomes very concrete and tangible. By employing annual themes, such values have been further mainstreamed across festivals participating in OH Europe, contributing to the development of the project's DNA. Every annual theme has been a commitment. Across the network, 14 festivals have interpreted this shared theme for their local contexts, and in doing so have brought diverse learning opportunities. For example, the primary intention behind the annual topic "Accessibility and inclusion" was to explore how architecture and urban design can contribute to making European cities more equitable, open and accommodating for all – regardless of a person's physical abilities or sensory needs. In committing themselves to this theme, partner organisations began to function as common body uniting European citizens interested in architecture and urban environment, irrespective of their personal circumstances. This is not a trivial commitment. When unpacking the concept of accessibility, one understands that language, social background and social position play out in the way European cities are open (or closed) to the people who live in them. This theme also raised a deeper question about who feels invited into architecture, and whose perspectives are recognised in the stories of the city.



Photo by Ravi Sejk. Courtesy of Open House Essen.

**CELEBRATING
ARCHITECTURE
TOGETHER**

A SHORT WALK FROM THE CENTRE

A short walk from the centre of Vilnius, I cross a bridge to the district of Žvėrynas. I'm off to meet Šarūnas, the proud owner of a new house in the neighbourhood. Šarūnas holds the distinction of being one of those rare homeowners who have agreed to open their private home to festival visitors. Open House's power to disrupt the public-private dichotomy is never more obvious than when a festival succeeds in presenting a private home or apartment to the public. In most cities, such visits are a rare and valued achievement – and in Vilnius, Šarūnas' cooperation has helped to make this a reality.



A family house in the district of Žvėrynas. Architecture: INBLUM Architects. Photo: Norbert Tukaj.

Žvėrynas, the district in which the house is located, is often called a “village in the city”. Next door to one of the city's largest parks, this architecturally significant area is known for its wooden houses, built in the early to mid-20th century and flanked by tall pines. But this historic neighbourhood is undergoing significant structural change. New and conflicting architectural interventions are threatening its character, says Šarūnas.

In many senses, Žvėrynas is the most beautiful area of Vilnius, but it's being degraded. So I'm really rooting for Žvėrynas, for the preservation of its uniqueness.



A family house in the district of Žvėrynas. Architecture: INBLUM Architects. Photo: Norbert Tukaj.

But Šarūnas' concern isn't born out of backward-looking nostalgia. Set amid the old wooden villas of Žvėrynas, his house is an example of contemporary wooden architecture. The project embraces the textures and materials of the neighbourhood, yet offers a redefinition of the surrounding architecture. As well as winning some important national architectural prizes, it received a record number of Open House visitors. Indeed, this recently built house has become a focal point in an ongoing debate about how modern design can complement or transform older surroundings. With its village-like feel, the view from the house is the thing Šarūnas singles out as its most precious feature:

“ Being with nature, seeing a different view every day. Plants sprouting in spring, flowers blooming, trees blossoming, fruit ripening... Sunrise, sunset, sunrise. That's something about this house I wouldn't change for anything: those big windows.

The house stands on a family plot shared with another home – a villa built in the early 20th century, situated just a few metres away. This villa has been home to generations of Šarūnas' family. Originally it was a practical, working house, surrounded by an orchard where Šarūnas fondly remembers his grandparents tending the trees. The new building ably demonstrates how a personal relationship with architecture leads to a better living environment. For Šarūnas, this appreciation comes from his direct connection to the place.

“ We wanted to build something of lasting value that would have a relationship with the neighbourhood in terms of its form, its volume, its materiality. But at the same time, we wanted to build a piece of modern architecture.

The house also feels somehow subtle yet radical – a quiet rebellion against the lack of architectural coherence Šarūnas perceives in Lithuania:

“ If you drive through a new district, it's completely eclectic. It's like each owner came back from vacation, brought back an idea and gave it to the architects. A complete hodgepodge. It really annoys me. In Bavaria, say, there is white plaster everywhere, tiled roofs. In Italy, you'll find a typical style of buildings in the mountains. I get an impression of architectural harmony. That's what's missing here... If you look at a new district in Lithuania, it's difficult to say what typical Lithuanian housing architecture is.

An unclear vision, says Šarūnas, has resulted in the lack of a distinctive identity. When there is no unified architectural identity, and the existing tradition does not satisfy one's needs, one inevitably becomes the co-creator of an entirely new concept. Thus, Šarūnas was determined to find a solution that was different from the new houses he saw in the immediate environment. It's a project he's clearly passionate about, fuelled by his affection for Žvėrynas and his desire to build something beautiful and modern that also blends harmoniously into its historic environment. Thanks to his productive collaboration with the architects and his enthusiasm for new building technologies, Šarūnas is eager to share even the tiniest details of the building process, the memories of which are still very fresh.

“ For me, those years [of design and construction] were the best. Our children were born; the trees were planted. As we lived there, I was very actively involved. It was fascinating. In fact, if you were to ask me what I’d like to do with my free time, I’d like to build another house like this. Well, maybe not exactly like this; maybe a little different. I felt so good about it. There were many challenges, many questions. I gained a lot of experience.

Once construction began, preserving these natural elements became a priority. For example, when building work exposed the roots of an old apple tree growing beside the house, progress was halted while the terrace was redesigned to protect it. The design of the house places a strong emphasis on the nature that surrounds it – the garden, the pine trees, the sky – and its expansive windows blur the line between inside and outside.

Reflecting this desire to incorporate natural and sustainable elements, the entire building was constructed using pine cross-laminated timber (CLT), a material still relatively new to Lithuania. Final assembly took less than a month, but the modular nature of CLT demanded extreme precision: each panel was pre-cut in a factory to fit like puzzle pieces. The project required constant coordination – and everyone involved needed to be willing to take risks and work with unfamiliar materials and processes. Šarūnas says that when the festival team contacted him with the idea of including his family home as part of OH Vilnius, the decision was not an easy one.

A family house in the district of Žvėrynas. Architecture: INBLUM Architects. Photo: Norbert Tukaj.



“ In the beginning, I was sceptical because we didn’t want to disrupt our privacy. But then we thought, ‘Look... if the organisers of this event, the architectural community, appreciated it, then maybe we ought to give something back to the public, to share it, so it can inspire somebody else.

One thing that may have added to Šarūnas’ confidence was the fact that he and his family were no strangers to OH Vilnius, having attended the festival in previous years.

“ I think it’s a very interesting event. It would be great to see more people discover it, and maybe it could be extended to allow access for a wider circle of people. There are buildings we haven’t visited because we didn’t have time, and we hope to visit next year. I think it educates the public, helps them to ask questions... Open House makes it easier for the average person to learn how to assess architecture, how to understand it.

During the festival, the house attracted more than 300 curious visitors over two days. Although the inside was closed to visitors, organisers prepared the house as a sort of “aquarium” for observation, its large windows open to allow visitors to gain a full sense of the interior. The house proved a valuable addition to the OH Vilnius programme. Visitors’ responses

were very positive, viewing it as an innovative experiment in bringing architectural harmony amid the eclectic environment of Vilnius.

“ It’s nice that people left seemingly inspired and grateful for the improvement in the environment of the area. Many people said they had no idea it was here in the yard, because it’s practically invisible from the street. I feel very good [about the experience]; we received a lot of appreciation for the house’s duality: although it’s a modern build, it doesn’t stand out as being uncharacteristic of the neighbourhood. I think it’s a great example of how you can maintain the historical forms of the district, its materiality, sustainability. Maybe some people might say it’s too modern for Žvėrynas, but I don’t think so. I think we’ve retained the historical essence of the district and brought it closer to the needs of modern life.

Šarūnas’ house is an example of an Open House venue that successfully opens up discussions about the quality of architecture to audiences who don’t necessarily have a grasp of its professional language – for whom discussions about balancing aesthetics and other social values of architecture with structural, material, environmental or functional

challenges are not accessible. Making concessions in this regard can introduce certain tensions into the way festivals touch upon the social role and professional realities of architects. As one festival organiser puts it:

“ Often, architectural schools promote the idea of the architect who knows everything. We believe architecture and urban planning affect all citizens, and must involve everyone.

(festival organiser)

In the previous chapter, we learned how OH Europe has helped festivals to embrace these new audiences. But most festivals also aim to empower them. When it comes to topics that are narrow and highly professional, this ambition brings inherent conflict. Celebrating architecture together is a beautiful idea, but you need inspiring stories like that of Šarūnas in order to speak about complex topics in lay terms without oversimplifying the underlying challenges. In this chapter, we highlight some of OH Europe’s achievements in helping to develop the engagement of European citizens with important questions about architecture and the quality of living environments.

A family house in the district of Žvėrynas. Architecture: INBLUM Architects. Photo: Norbert Tukaj.



COMMITTING TO THE DEMOCRATISATION OF ARCHITECTURE

A successful Open House experience usually conveys a message that is neither too technical in terms of its professional content, nor too shallow in terms of its understanding of space. To achieve this requires either carefully curated engagement with professionals, or an intermediary – a guide, who can convey professionally important information with an enhanced relevance for the average visitor. The activities of OH Europe, presented in the previous chapter, have helped to move towards this goal in multiple ways. Opportunities to explore the curatorial practices of festivals run by strong architectural organisations have opened up a rich pool of ideas about how to twist and play with the concept of Open House festivals to make them more relatable to the realities of citizens in a particular city. The 2025 annual summit in Dublin explored the benefits of inviting curators from the outside the field of architecture. Such efforts make Open House festivals more socially relevant, and thus open to democratic debate on the values of architecture. They also make these festivals stand out from more professional-oriented events and initiatives, which are not always as successful in attracting the attention of wider audiences:

I guess we have some other architecture conferences and events that focus more on technicians, architects and engineers. When I go to those events and I share my experiences with friends and family, they are like: "Oh, yes – but that's not for me!" But with Open House, it's something that I can share with everyone – friends, family, it doesn't matter. Their age doesn't matter; their studies don't matter. It's something that makes us feel we are part of the same thing. All of us.

(festival organiser)

To achieve such an effect, one needs to approach the diversity of the relationships that various audiences have with architectural topics. In essence, a festival needs to commit to democratising the professional questions of architects and urbanists. Open House events contribute to such a direction by creating a cultural space for encounters that might otherwise not happen. But architecture, once acknowledged, can be seen as a medium to foster debate about social interactions and daily rituals. A lot of Open House initiatives are excellent at making use of such opportunities. These efforts go far beyond simplistic questions of function versus aesthetics. Their approaches open up endless possibilities to curate events that relate architecture with the everyday life of citizens. The opening up of socially or culturally segregated spaces also becomes an opportunity for a meeting of people from very different corners of the social space to exchange their experiences of a city:

"Lots of people in our city come from different cultures with totally different backgrounds. I meet people who say, 'I was born here.' And I'm like, 'OK, so now I'm going to show you your city, but in a different way.'... People who had been connected to it in the past came to see their place, but also to tell other people what this place means to them. There were people coming from different cultures, but actually being neighbours. In this neighbourhood there were so many personal stories behind the closed door that we opened.

(festival organiser)

To achieve such effects, buildings need to be approached not just as architectural objects, but as cultural artefacts with specific social meanings in both present and past. OH festivals also invest significant efforts in translating technical content about the buildings in which tours are being held, into topics and issues that relate to present urban realities. But making this step without losing the professional meanings that lie behind the story of the building is neither a straightforward nor an easy task. OH Europe has helped partners to cope with this challenge through its common annual topics. Common themes such as "Building futures together", "Accessibility and inclusion" and "Future heritage" have encouraged organisers to experiment with venues and narratives that might previously have felt too sensitive or difficult to access. Such common themes have also offered a way for partners to achieve a common focus across the European network. Through network-wide discussions about a topic, examples of best practice and the volunteer exchange programme, local teams have gained practical support in making an extra step towards translating the related problematics for citizens – and thus, democratising their festivals. An especially valuable contribution in this regard has come from festivals that are more experienced in delivering complex curatorial messages. OH Lisboa, which is run by Trienal de Arquitectura de Lisboa, is an example of one such organisation that can inspire other festivals through its curatorial experience. Implemented by the same organisation that organises the national architectural triennial, OH Lisboa has an exceptional curatorial approach. Every year, the festival brings a new theme to the forefront, which has helped this Open House festival to become a place for public debate and mediation between professional ideas and public interest. The programme is curated by an external curator – a professional architect, critic or theorist – who conceptualises the edition's overall theme and defines its architectural selection. The guest curator is also responsible for crafting a cohesive narrative that connects the open buildings into a statement about the city. In this way, the festival introduces new discourse about what constitutes architecture, heritage and public space.

DIFFERENT EDITIONS OF OH LISBOA

OH Lisboa is not the only festival that has such a strong curatorial direction, and the success of individual events often lies in maintaining a balance between targeted messaging and quality entertainment. In the final annual summit of the present wave of OH Europe, the organisers also intend to invite participants to share overall techniques, insights and ideas on how to build content that is

both entertaining and informative. Most festival organisers strongly believe they are already successful in translating architectural or urban concepts into the everyday realities of citizens, thereby making an important contribution in the quest to democratise discussions about architecture and the urban environment. This strong belief among organisers that they are successful in informing citizens about architecture is also supported by audience feedback. Nearly 90 % visitors to OH events agree that these events are informative. This figure is slightly higher among older audiences and women as well as audiences outside professional architectural circles. Professionals or students of architecture were slightly less

likely to express strong agreement with this statement – which is to be expected, as distance from the field might make the content feel more novel or valuable to non-professionals or lay visitors than to those within the field. Such trends among professionally diverse visitors show that OH events are not a mere entertainment, but an informative engagement with the urban environment. These effects create a good basis for festivals to become agents for the democratisation of architecture. OH Europe has encouraged its partners to embrace this role.



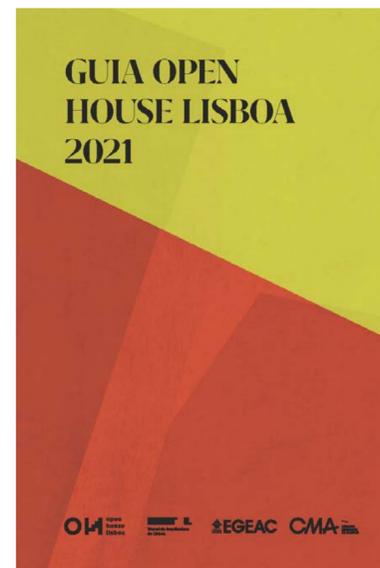
2018 – *To Inhabit a City in Transformation*
Curated by *Luís Santiago Baptista and Maria Rita Pais*

This edition presented distinct ways of seeing Lisbon through nine zones, creating a temporal and spatial arc that connected the city's historical core to its contemporary transformations.



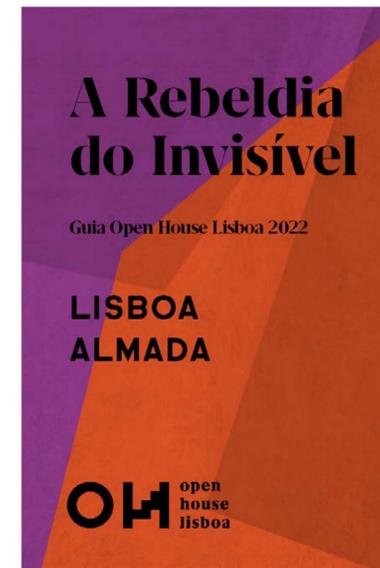
2019 – *Lisbon without a centre*
Curated by *Patrícia Robalo*

An expanded perspective on Lisbon, challenging traditional urban hierarchies by questioning the ideas of centre, periphery and urban limits.



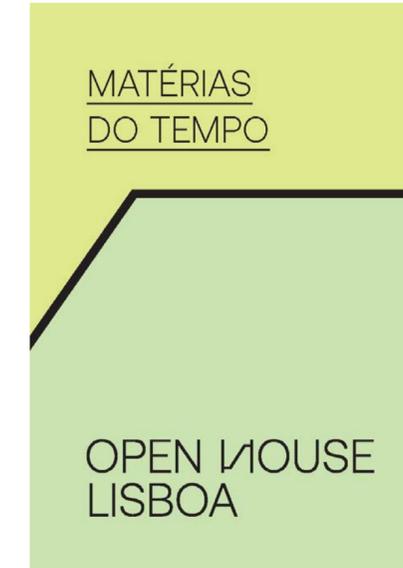
2021 *The Ways of Water*
Curated by the *Baldios* collective of landscape architects

An exploration of Lisbon's geography through the element of water, tracing its rivers, coastlines and historical hydrological systems as structuring forces in the city.



2022 – *The Rebellion of the Invisible*
Curated by *Aurora Arquitectos*.

This edition focused on what is hidden, forgotten or neglected within the urban landscape. It invited visitors to look beyond the visible layers of Lisbon and to rediscover the city through its overlooked architectures, marginal spaces and the subtle presences that shape everyday urban life.



2023 – *Time Matters*
Curated by *Atelier Embaixada*

A drift through the many lives of buildings, exploring the transformations of materials, uses and meanings that accumulate over time.

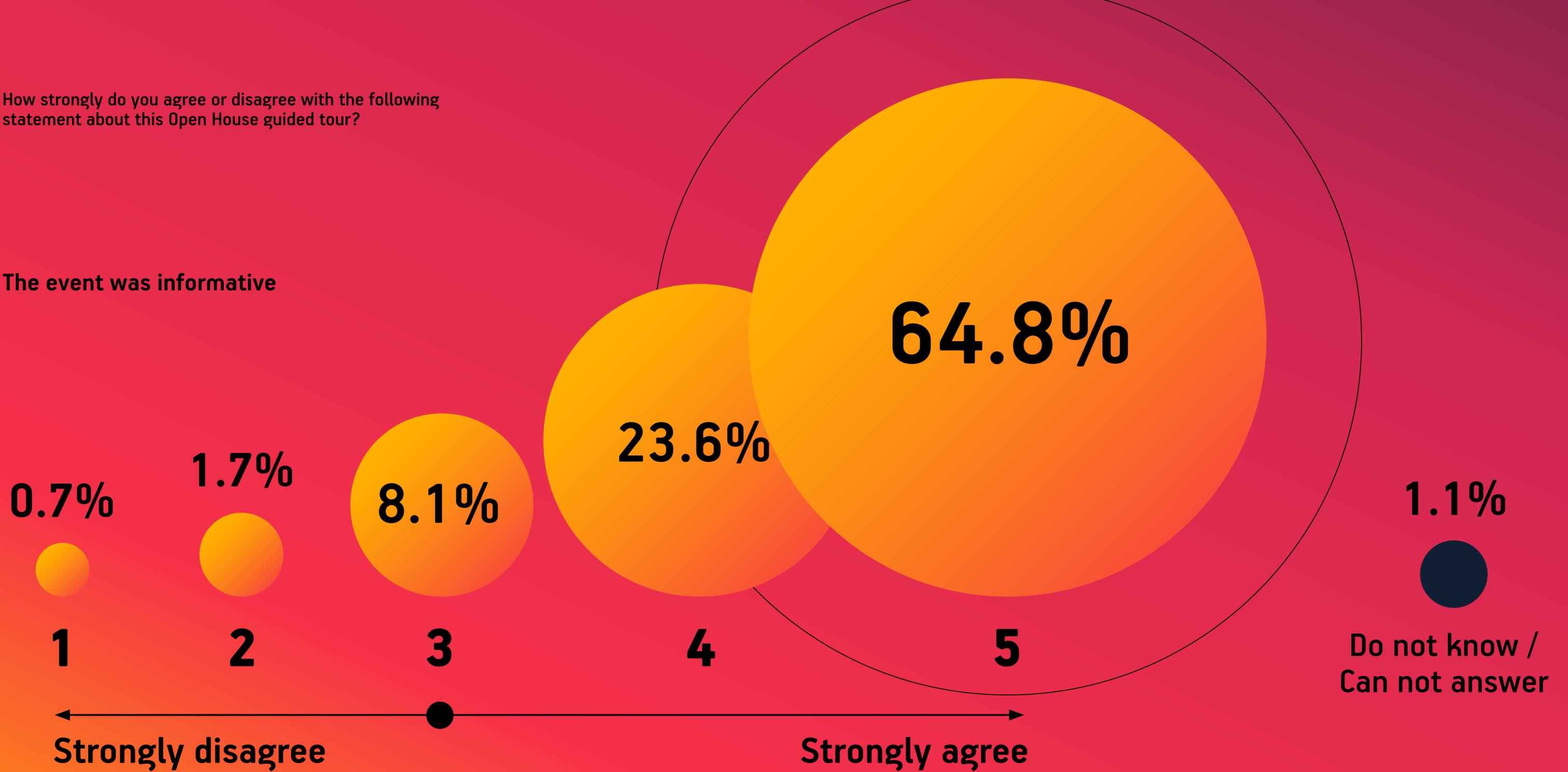


2024 – *Hybrid Designs for Transitional Spaces*
Curated by *Alexandre Marques Pereira and Sandra Marques Pereira*

This edition investigated the hybridity of transitions in the city — spatial, social and architectural — examining how Lisbon's built environment mutates through overlapping functions, forms and temporalities.

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement about this Open House guided tour?

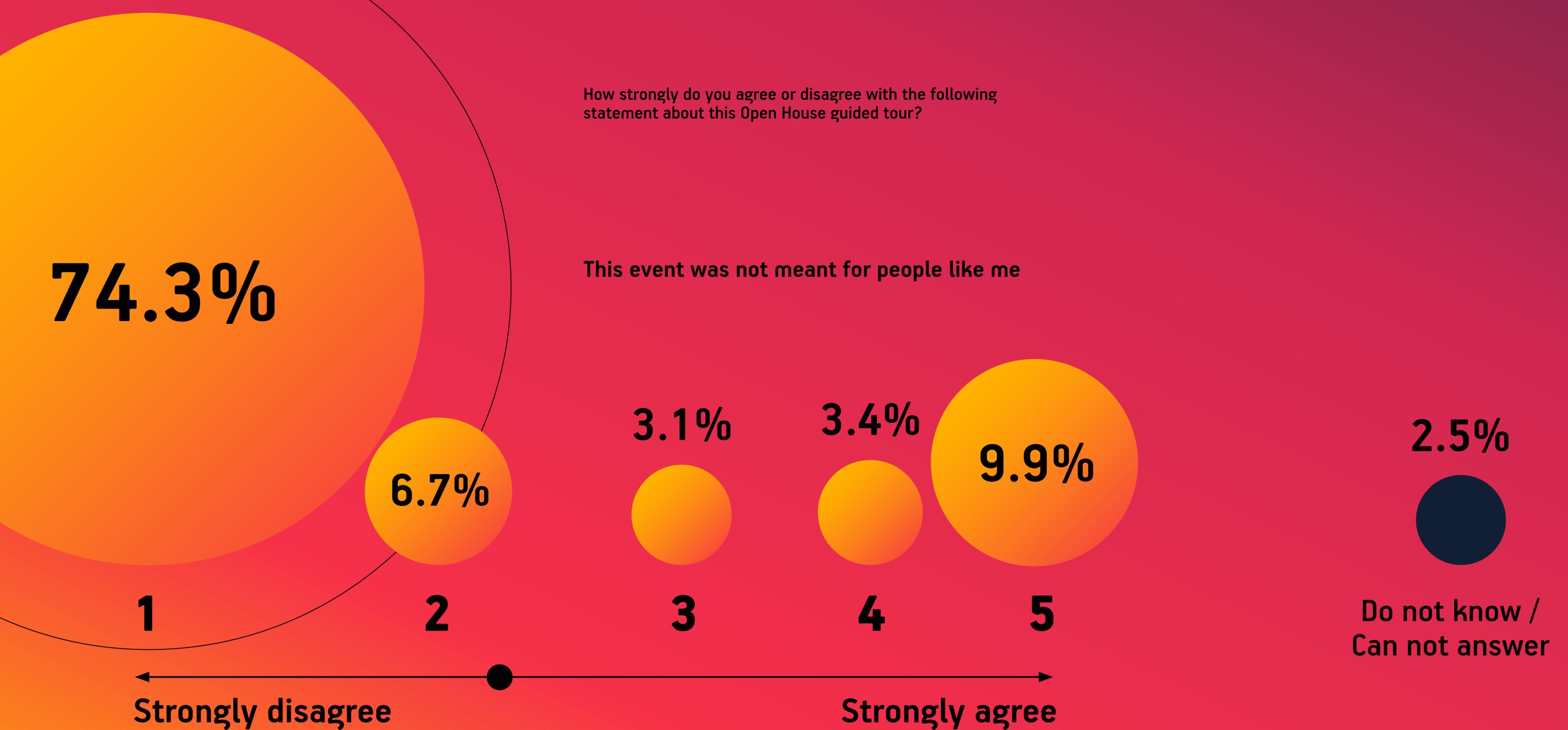
The event was informative



Note: data from visitor surveys implemented at festivals in cities participating in the OH Europe project. The surveys were implemented in 2024 and 2025. The chart is based on a subset of data gathered using a random sampling method (n = 4,865). Total survey responses (n = 10,994) across all participating cities include data gathered using on-the-spot sampling and dissemination of the survey via social media or email lists. Full-dataset results for this question: Strongly disagree – 0.6 %; Disagree – 2.5 %; Neither disagree nor agree – 9.1 %; Agree – 26.6 %; Strongly agree – 60.0 %; Do not know/cannot answer – 1.1 %.

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement about this Open House guided tour?

This event was not meant for people like me



Note: data from visitor surveys implemented at festivals in cities participating in the OH Europe project. The surveys were implemented in 2024 and 2025. The chart is based on a subset of data gathered using a random sampling method (n = 4,848). Total survey responses (n = 10619) across all participating cities include data gathered using on-the-spot sampling and dissemination of the survey via social media or email lists. Full-dataset results for this question: Strongly disagree – 75.1 %; Disagree – 8.0 %; Neither disagree nor agree – 3.6 %; Agree – 3.1 %; Strongly agree – 7.4 %; Do not know/cannot answer – 2.8 %.

The strong agreement among visitors that OH events are not mere entertainment but also an informative engagement with the urban environment, is not the only indication that these events contribute to the democratisation of architecture. Almost 80 % of visitors to events strongly disagree with the statement that the event was “not for people like me”. This is a great achievement in terms of inclusion, demonstrating the success of the efforts made by organisers to democratise the topic of architecture. This aim however is everlasting journey. Among the 1 in 10 people who felt that the festival was not the place for them, one is more likely to find younger people, male audiences and people with vocational rather than higher education. There is a common understanding among festival organisers that to make everyone feel welcome, each festival must navigate certain challenges that are specific to its local context. Among these is the sometimes problematic public image of the architectural profession itself. This image is often constructed through fragmented public representations of “star architects”, or through the personal experiences of citizens during the technical delivery of projects, which sometimes leave the impression that the profession uses a technical and exclusionary language. Despite some positive developments across European countries, the profession is still dogged by stereotypes of elitism or male domination. Taking a critical approach to the public image of the profession also helps organisers to achieve the overall goal of their events:

I think architects are important, but my concern is not to emphasise the importance of a person. Sometimes when you speak of big names, people say, 'Oh, that's a Mies van der Rohe. That's architecture. So that's fantastic, obviously. For sure, it's great,' as if it's a painting of Picasso – for sure, it's relevant. But we're breaking down this wall or this glass with the name of the architect, and we just want people to understand: 'Do you like this architecture? Do you think it's useful? Do you think it's interesting? Did it achieve the objective for which it was built?' So I don't care whether Mies van der Rohe or [mentions the name of a colleague sitting nearby] has designed it. It's great. It's functional and it's perfect. The objective is trying to understand. For sure, the individual architect is also relevant, but not just the feeling that the name is what's important.

(festival organiser)

In a way, OH festivals offer a reverse image of the stereotypes applied to the architectural profession. If we consider the positions that festival organisers occupy within the field of architecture – often, they do not inhabit elite positions in offices that make grand designs, but more humble positions in architectural education. It is this aspect of OH festivals that makes them a suitable internal voice for reflection and critique on the architectural profession. In addition, gender differences within and outside the organisations that curate these events signal certain aspects of the culture of OH festivals. More than 80 % of the representatives of festivals in the OH Europe project are women, showing that engagement with the missions of these festivals has a clear gender dimension. This is also a case when we speak about their audiences. As participants in OH events, women are more likely to feel engaged by the event. They are more likely to agree that the event was an exceptional experience, and to agree that the event made them think about their city or even the profession of architect. They are also more likely to report feeling part of the city after the event.

This is the context from which some festivals choose to speak about gender inequalities within the industry itself. Some take this as an implicit topic, translating it into a horizontal storyline. Others address the topic directly. For example, the 2023 edition of the OH Brno festival highlighted the role of women in the city's architectural past and present. The thematic focus of the festival, entitled "Women in Brno Architecture", was not merely an archival or celebratory gesture. It provided a reflexive lens through which to re-examine questions of visibility, authorship and gendered professional identity in the industry of the built environment. The curators emphasised the importance of broadening the public understanding of architectural authorship, urging a shift in the way we think about buildings. They are presented not just as isolated "masterworks", but complex collective histories, shaped by planners, engineers, conservationists, teachers and bureaucrats – many of whom are women working outside the limelight of public recognition. The festival's historical narrative highlighted how, until the early 20th century, architecture in Brno remained an exclusively male profession – just as it was across most of Europe at the time.

The festival also gave attention to the participation of women in large state-run design institutions such as Stavoprojekt. The period of state socialism was marked by a model of collective authorship in which architectural credit was often subsumed under institutional names or attributed to senior male figures. Through archival research and site-specific exhibitions, the festival showcased projects co-authored or led by women. The flagship project of the festival – a conversion of the former municipal slaughterhouse into the Brněnské komunikace headquarters by architect Barbora Jenčková – symbolised both a literal and a metaphorical act of architectural re-inscription. This was a transformation of masculine-coded industrial heritage through contemporary female authorship. Such examinations of internal struggles and power structures within the architectural profession contribute to empowerment not only of professionals, but also of lay audiences. This is highly important aspect of the movement towards the democratisation of architecture.

When exploring the origins of specific aesthetics and the social meanings of places, one can initiate short but valuable moments of community building. These moments can redefine what it means to belong in a city – as a shared cultural and civic responsibility and a shared space. Participation in OH Europe has helped individual festivals to raise their profiles in the cities and countries in which they work:

I can tell we have more visibility... we've had more volunteers since we've been in this together. And I think this has a huge impact, because it's not only [our country and our city]. Yeah, that's what it's about... We belong to a bigger event together.

(festival organiser)

Community building has strengthened the identities of festivals as well as helping to explain the relevance of their social mission to others. Getting involved in a festival organisation can be a very enriching experience. A lot of organisers address their volunteers as a community. This is not just central to the successful delivery of the festival – it's also a tangible demonstration of the festivals' values of democratisation. Through consistent and focused work, these values are also transferred to festival attendees. By becoming better informed about questions of architecture and the urban environment through the efforts of festivals, attendees are more likely to act in the public interest. These qualities, which are inspired not only in volunteers but also in the festivals' most loyal audiences, are clearly the qualities of a civil society group. By mobilising these groups from across European cities, OH Europe has created a latent yet vibrant European community of citizens committed to the democratisation of the urban environment. This paves the way for other types of impacts.



Photo courtesy of Open House Brno.

Some *impressions* from participants in Open House events

"I was impressed by the beautiful architectural ideas and technical details, but saddened by the decay from the 1950s under communist rule."

(Woman aged 55–64 years at OH Prague)

"I feel sorry for the important buildings that have been left to collapse or been demolished all over Greece, not just in Athens. I hope the Open House will expand to other cities in the country, like the city I live near to. I hope contemporary architects will be inspired and create interesting buildings."

(Woman aged 55–64 years at OH Athens, retired)

"A very good initiative, even for non-experts. It's important to know one's own city from these points of view as well."

(Woman aged 55–64 years at OH Milan, currently unemployed)

"I am thinking about the limits of architecture, the dividing line between strict functionality as often seen by clients and the poetic dimensions of the built environment, which architects often try unsuccessfully to explain to them."

(Woman aged 25–24 years at OH Slovenia, Ljubljana, architect)

"We should be proud. Our architects were excellent."

(Woman aged 45–54 years at OH Prague)

"It was a good experience. You get to know new realities and rediscover or deepen historical ones, and you discover how good planning makes life easier and more pleasant."

(Woman aged 65–74 years at OH Milan)

"I was very proud of our architects."

(Woman aged 35–44 years at OH Tallinn, working as an interior designer)

"I was completely blown away. I'm not an expert, but I think it's a brilliantly designed and executed building, both in terms of architecture, furnishings and exterior. Congratulations to the owners and architect!"

(Woman aged 55–64 years at OH Slovenia, Ljubljana)

"Extremely stimulating events that succeed in spreading architectural skills even to those who do not work in the sector. Events related to dissemination and education about music, art and literature are plentiful; those related to architecture are unfortunately lacking. Excellent work!"

(Woman aged 35–44 years at OH Milan, working in profession not related to architecture)

"Useful for building my house and finding the right architectural firm."

(Man aged 45–54 years at OH Slovenia, Ljubljana)

ENCOURAGING ENGAGEMENT WITH THE POLITICS OF SPACE

Among the partners of OH Europe, sentiments about citizen empowerment run very strong. This is an aspect of organisational culture that is in a sense programmed by the very format of Open House events. Involving “normal people”, “lay citizens” or “people from the streets” – in other words, people who are not necessarily related to architecture, or are non-professionals in the field – is the unique mission of these festivals. It is, quite simply, what these festival organisers do. The act of opening up spaces is seen by organisers as an act of citizen empowerment or the democratisation of the field of architecture. Such a perception of this practice was further nurtured during the OH Europe initiative through its aim to build organic relationships with the audiences it reaches. Festival organisers emphasise that the aim of Open House activities is not education or “schooling”. The knowledge that arises from Open House is created through interactions with the opened-up space, interactions with the guide, and quite often also through the contributions of event attendees:

I A cleaning lady who cleans the building every day – she can tell the story of how people use the building. The teachers and the children in the school can also explain their school. So the visitors can really get to know the whole process, from the beginning to the user. It helps them understand what good architecture is. That way, they can become empowered and not be afraid to demand good architecture. I think sometimes ordinary people are afraid to get into or participate in this dialogue. Some projects may be bad for the city, but people are afraid to say so, because they are afraid that they are just common people. But if they know these stories – they become more empowered; they feel safer and can advocate for good places, good spaces, and demand them from the authorities.

(festival organiser)



Photo by Brendan Keogh. Courtesy of Open House Dublin.



Photo by Hugo David. Courtesy of Lisbon Architecture Triennale.

There is, however, an important dividing line with regard to the ambitions that different festivals have to go further. Empowering diverse groups of citizens to think about architecture and the urban environment as topics of their own is one achievement. But it is another step entirely to try to engage them with various questions concerning the politics of space. The partners of OH Europe differ greatly in terms of their capacities to provoke such engagement. For small organisations, which largely depend on private funding, such ambitions are often out of reach. But for established public organisations, this is an organic part of their role. Festivals such as OH Dublin extend their programmes beyond the traditional weekend festival model, centres on guided tours around buildings. In addition to this core format, OH Dublin has developed a month-long programme that includes weekday lunchtime discussions, where members of the wider public can register to take part in conversations with architects, practitioners and individuals involved in urban decision-making processes. These “Open Table” gatherings offer a discussion format that focuses explicitly on questions of space, power and decision-making. In 2025, Dublin’s Open Table addressed five thematic areas – Diaspora, Diversity, Design, Demolition and Democracy – each corresponding to the political and social concerns of the city. The sessions were hosted by architects, academics, activists and practitioners including individuals directly involved in planning, housing, equality initiatives and deliberative processes.

Discussions take place over lunch around shared tables, so the number of places is limited. Such sessions create opportunities for dialogue, the exchange of perspectives and the articulation of public concerns around issues such as diversity, housing, democracy and the future of the built environment. Compared with guided tours, which tend to be largely passive forms of engagement, focusing on listening and observation, these discussion-based formats enable more direct interaction and feedback, and provide an opportunity for professionals and activists to interact with city dwellers.

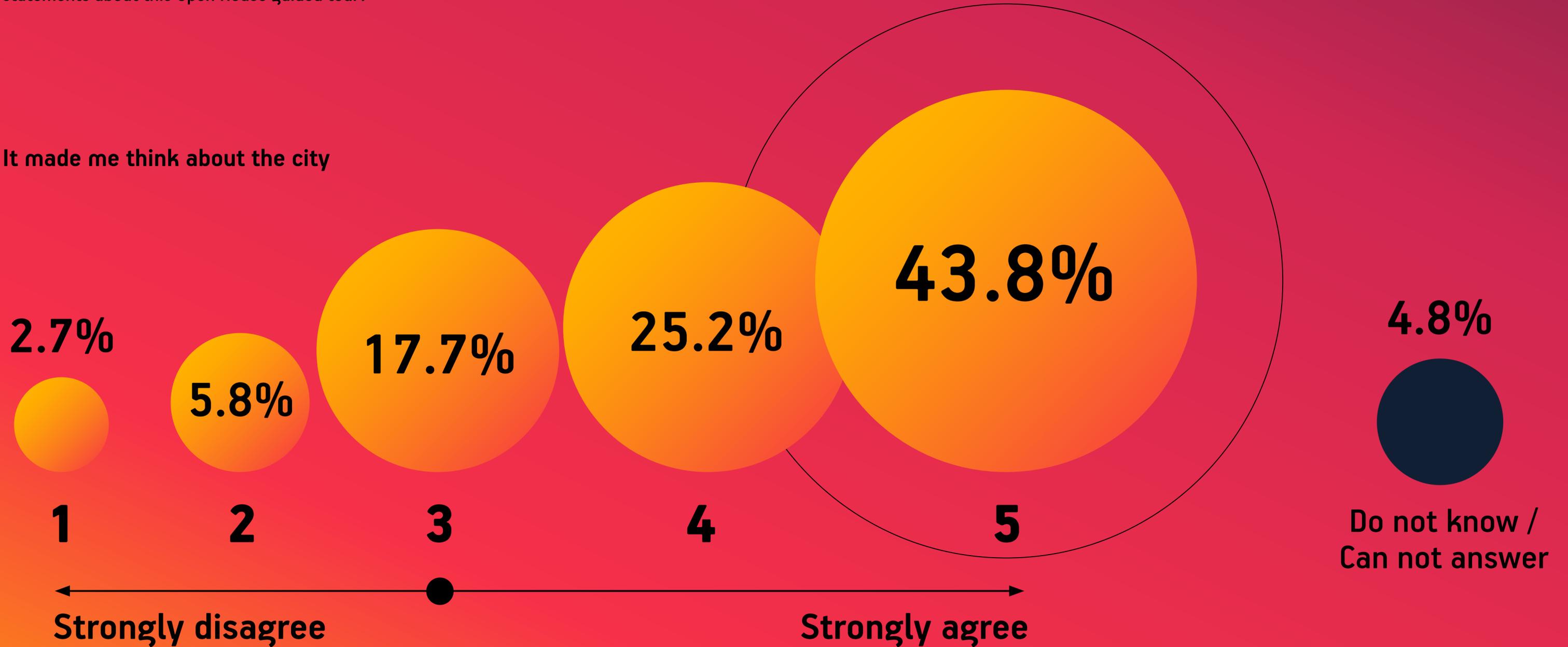
For those OH Europe partners who function in less favourable environments, seeing examples of such practices has been

an important encouragement to fund and implement events that highlight political questions of space. The project’s EU funding provides such organisations with an opportunity to strengthen their engagement with these complex questions. This EU funding was accompanied by a commitment to orient festival programmes towards commonly defined annual topics, such as the previously described topic of “Accessibility and inclusion”. Partners were invited to recognise how these topics were expressed within their own cities, and encouraged to give greater visibility to them. A perfect example of this genre of co-curation was the tour of Jordbro Resource Park suggested by OH Stockholm, inspired by the annual topic of “Building futures together”, which was devoted to sustainable architectural practices. Almost all new construction in Stockholm requires rock material – either to level the ground for foundations or as in-fill material around pipes and utilities. So a visit to this park touches upon the very starting point for any architecture: the resources required to build any building. It also reminds participants of how much pollution and energy use is related to the construction industry.

Jordbro Resource Park handles roughly 700,000 tons of rock per year – equivalent to 215 times the weight of the Golden Bridge of Slussbron in Stockholm. But at Jordbro Resource Park, this blasted rock is given new life. Resource parks are places where controlled surplus material can be brought in, refined and reused in new housing, infrastructure projects and other construction necessary for a city to grow. Unlike landfills, where such material would end up sitting unused, the Jordbro Resource Park raises the hope of a more sustainable future for building. In a unique and powerful way, this tour showed the heavy burden that the (re)building of our cities places on our environment. Experiences of this kind create another effect that is characteristic of Open House events: prompting attendees to start thinking more about their city. Such effects are, however, more likely to appear among older participants in events and among female audiences.

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about this Open House guided tour?

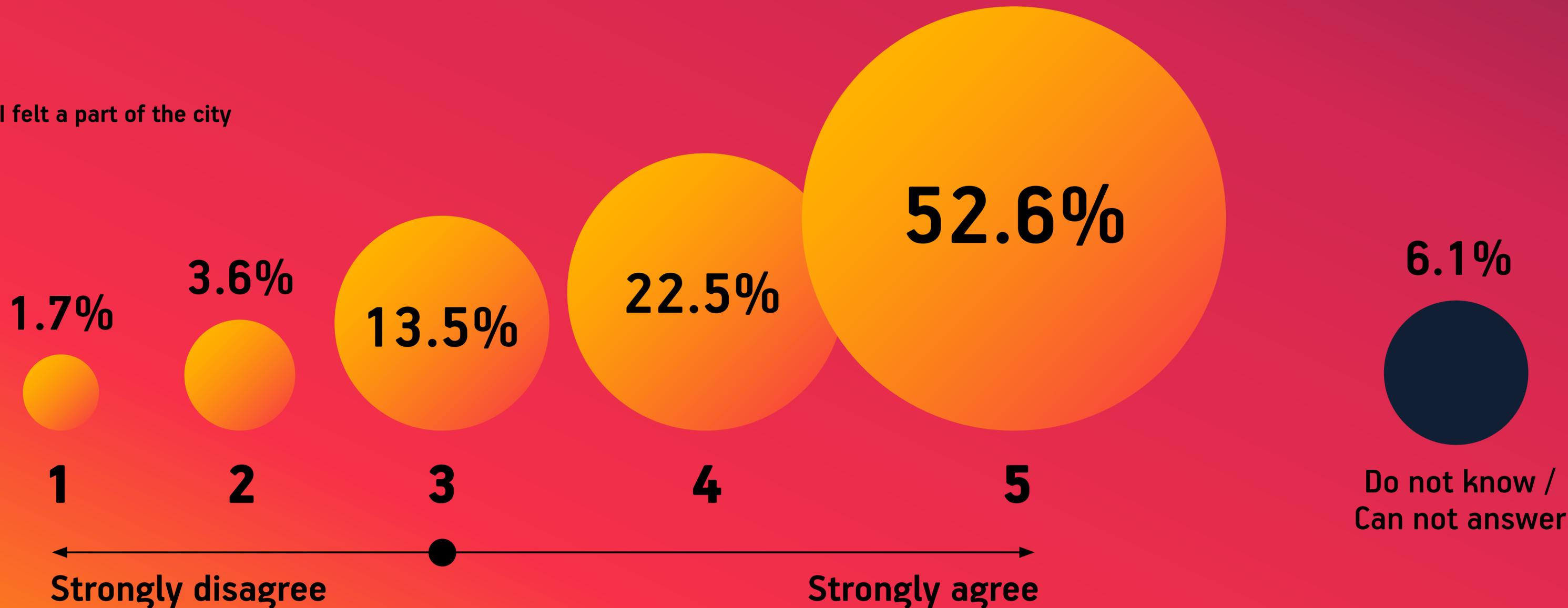
It made me think about the city



Note: data from visitor surveys implemented at festivals in cities participating in the OH Europe project. The surveys were implemented in 2024 and 2025. The chart is based on a subset of data gathered using a random sampling method (n = 4,873). Total survey responses (n = 10,977) across all participating cities include data gathered using on-the-spot sampling and dissemination of the survey via social media or email lists. Full-dataset results for this question: Strongly disagree – 4.5 %; Disagree – 6.5 %; Neither disagree nor agree – 17.2 %; Agree – 27.1 %; Strongly agree – 39.4 %; Do not know/cannot answer – 5.2%.

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about this Open House guided tour?

I felt a part of the city



Note: data from visitor surveys implemented at festivals in cities participating in the OH Europe project. The surveys were implemented in 2024 and 2025. The chart is based on a subset of data gathered using a random sampling method (n = 4416). Total survey responses (n = 10,222) across all participating cities include data gathered using on-the-spot sampling and dissemination of the survey via social media or email lists. Full-dataset results for this question: Strongly disagree – 1.6 %; Disagree – 5.0 %; Neither disagree nor agree – 14.6 %; Agree – 24.2 %; Strongly agree – 50.5 %; Do not know/cannot answer – 4.0 %.

However, the effects of OH experiences do not stop at simply thinking through the realities of your city. They are transformed into feelings of care and belonging. More than two-thirds of participants agreed, after attending an Open House tour, that they felt they were part of their city. Here again, age and life experience as well as gender have an impact on the level of identification. Nevertheless, this strengthened sense of belonging is visible across all groups. Instilling such attitudes in visitors is both a result of the hard work of festival organisers, but also reflects a level of trust and a relationship with their audiences that enable festivals to open up the more complicated questions that arise from being together in a city. To this end, festivals have begun to implement tours whose object is neither a house nor an architectural concept, but the city itself – with all of its complexities of the politics of space. A good example of such a tour is the opening up of Linnahall by OH Tallinn. Implementing this tour also marked a certain tipping point for OH Tallinn, as it began to engage more with questions of the politics of space. Unlike iconic landmarks that can attract visitors effortlessly, Linnahall requires guides who can explain its layered history, its architectural significance and its contextual meanings.

Tallinn's Linnahall, otherwise known as Tallinn City Hall, was constructed in preparation for the 1980 Moscow Olympics while Estonia was part of the Soviet Union. Designed by architect Rene Karp, it was an attempt to blend historical symbolism with the brutalist architectural style of the time. Its design also aimed to connect the city with its seaside, making the

coast more accessible to the public. Over time, Linnahall's function shifted several times – the building functioned as concert hall, but has also comprised office spaces, a nightclub and a bowling alley, as well as operating as an office for the ferry terminal. The building was also a filming location for Christopher Nolan's film *Tenet*. Even with all of these activities going on, the owners of the building struggled with the maintenance issues typical of Soviet-era construction. After the building closed in 2009, Linnahall began to deteriorate quickly, with problems such as mould, falling ceiling panels and outdated equipment making it unsuitable for contemporary needs.

Following its closure, Linnahall has become one of those buildings that raise questions over its complicated heritage. It presents an interesting paradox faced by many cities dealing with brutalist architecture: what to do with constructions that are so large, they are prohibitively expensive to renovate. However, Linnahall's monumental scale and bold design, which encompasses vast amounts of space, is also unique and would be hard to replicate in the modern era. Thus, we are confronted with a building that is in a prime location and holds historical and sentimental importance to residents. It is an example of architectural heritage that is too valuable to lose, yet too costly to save.

OH Tallinn made use of the opportunities that such buildings present to open up discussions about the city's future urban landscape. After the building was opened to visitors during OH Tallinn in 2019, tours quickly became overwhelmingly

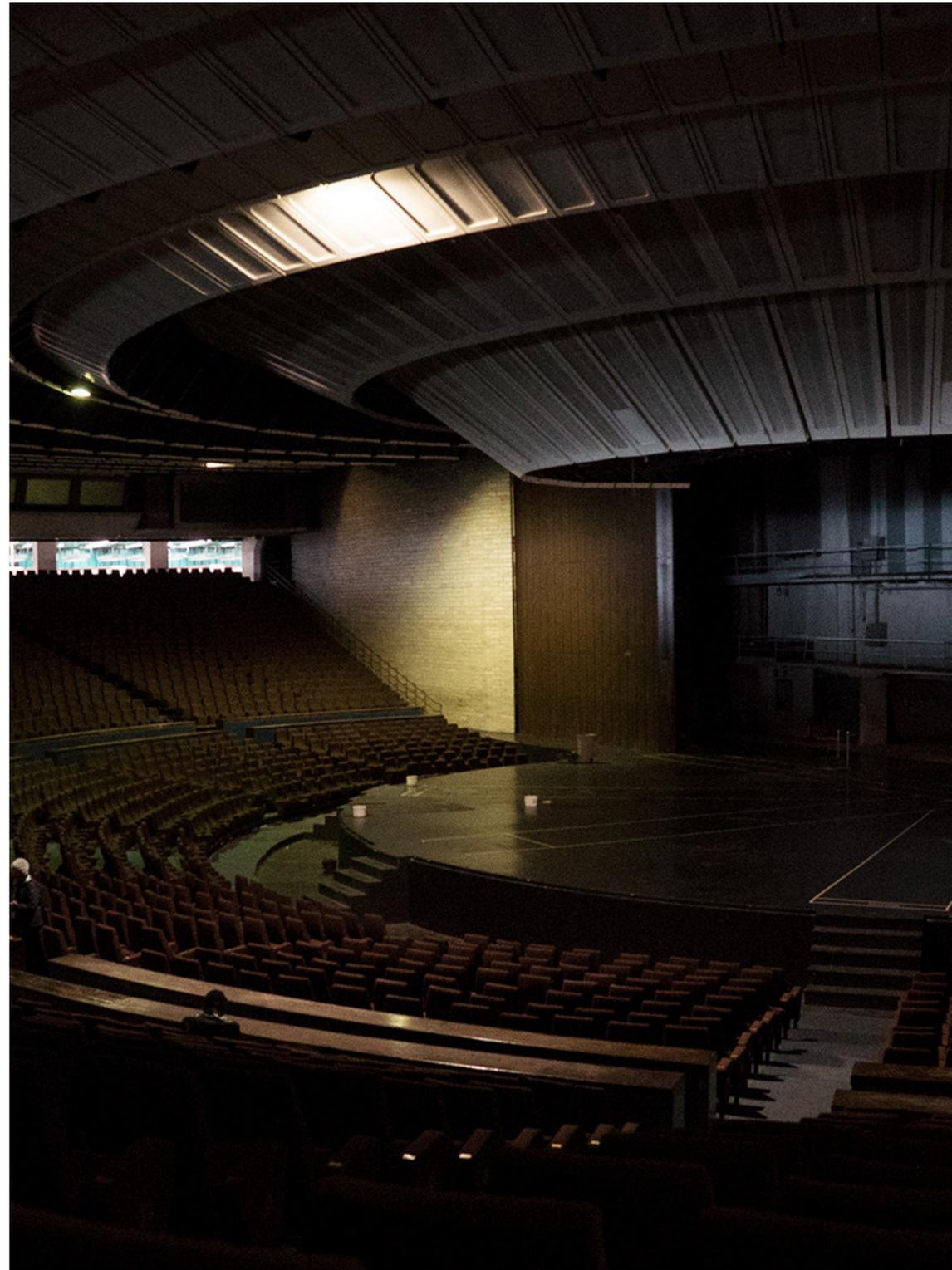


Photo by Kaur Tõra. Courtesy of Open House Tallinn.

popular, underlining their importance to society. These tours also act as a platform for dialogue between generations – those with personal memories of Linnahall during its years of operation, and those encountering it for the first time. The tours create a unique opportunity to forge new meanings and connections with a building that remains a prominent feature of Tallinn's cityscape but lacks a direct function in today's society, making it challenging to generate new, shared memories organically. In this context, the tours serve both as a bridge and a space for reflection.



Photo by Evert Palmets. Courtesy of Open House Tallinn.

Redevelopment plans for Linnahall are frequently discussed, but no cohesive solution has yet emerged. Open House tours promote engagement and encourage dialogue about the building's past, present and potential future, fostering civic debate about its role in Tallinn's urban landscape. But this is just one among many examples in which a complicated building is used by an Open House festival to open up debate about the value of architectural and urban spaces, as well as arguments for the costly repair or preservation of uncomfortable heritage. Like many other examples of brutalist architecture, the building provokes diverse emotional reactions. Responding to such emotions is a strategy used by festival organisers in other cities too:

Of course, when the buildings get old in a bad way, [they] start to fall apart. And sometimes it is necessary to demolish them. And quite frankly, it's not often that something better is built instead. I think this is one of the problems that needs to be addressed in our city. This motivates me a lot – the fact that we speak not about traditional layers of our city, such as baroque or elements of gothic or something else, but also modernism... and also post-modernism, which is completely undervalued and unrecognised by many. For me, it is important to understand why these are important. If people start to understand this, maybe they will start to value their environment much more. I think that, even psychologically, it is important for each and every one of us to understand where we live. And that our environment is valuable.

(Festival volunteer)



Photo by Kevin Loigu. Courtesy of Open House Tallinn.



Photo by Ste Murray. Courtesy of Open House Dublin.

To achieve such deep impacts, festivals need to become storytellers connecting the history of the building with the emotions and questions of visitors. The organisers of such tours aim to invoke a sense of care – not only for the houses visited, but for the city in general. To achieve such transformative impacts, an Open House event can make creative use of an aging building with strong affective qualities to convey messages about controversies in architecture. OH Europe has built on such strategies in its attempts to encourage partner organisations to engage with more complicated topics relating to the politics of space. The most direct use of such strategies was in the annual topic “Future heritage”, which invited participants to look into how viewing heritage merely as a transcript of the past oversimplifies its significance in today’s turbulent times. This flipping of the concept towards the future encouraged curatorial strategies that reflected on what we in the present are leaving for generations to come. The theme provided an invitation to speak about which buildings, spaces and practices of today might become tomorrow’s legacy – and how values, lifestyles and social change shape what is considered worth preserving. By its essence, this was probably the most effective annual topic in terms of encouraging partners to infuse their programmes with more politically engaged content. Other topics, such as sustainability, also offered such potential. But the success of such a coordination tool also lies in the quality of the partnership itself. Over the years, partners of OH Europe have learned how to arrive together at the choice of a stimulating curatorial direction, and how they can help each other to deliver it. The ultimate winners in this process are visitors, who receive architectural and urbanist narratives that translate more closely into their everyday concerns – and cities, which gain citizens who are informed and engaged with such topics.

STRENGTHENING **SOLIDARITY** WITHIN THE ARCHITECTURAL PROFESSION

Architects usually share an equal part, along with other professionals, in bringing about the joy of Open House festivals. But in some cases, they become the central figures – both in the overall organisation of the festival, but also in the presentation of specific buildings or sites. One benefit of such a situation is that it creates opportunities to strengthen identification with this profession. The OH Europe programme has supported festivals in their efforts to explain the meaning and practicalities of architects' work to wider audiences. A good example of an event specifically designed for such a purpose is the opening of architectural offices to the public implemented by OH Athens.

This distinctive OH format is an event carried out in parallel to the festival, directly connecting the architectural community with the public. Open Office initially began in 2020, but the pandemic halted physical visits, and so the initiative was implemented as a series of online meetings or recorded speeches by professionals. Here, architects discussed their working philosophy, design approaches and other themes, including those aligning with the annual theme. These videos attracted thousands of views. In 2025, the format returned in the form

of in-person visits. During this edition, nine architects' offices across Athens welcomed small groups of visitors during working hours, offering them a rare opportunity to observe architects in their everyday professional environment. Open Office both articulates professional solidarity with the architectural field and creates a space for dialogue. Although relatively small in scale (only 2 % of all visitors attended these tours), this format remains an important variation on Open House events. The benefits of this format in bringing the public closer to the work of architects has made it popular among other partners of OH Europe. But while involving architects in the delivery of events provides opportunities for them to communicate their work, it must also be acknowledged that the image of architects brings with it certain unarticulated power dynamics:

[Architects] operate within many limits, and at the end their work is judged on its aesthetics. This is something that people, users, never think about.

Yes, architects are maybe like the managers in other stakeholders. It's hard to understand this profession. [Architects] have to manage different ideas, different influences, different stakeholders.

To coordinate everyone in a project and try to [achieve] the best outcome possible. And in another way, they have this power, [in spite of] all the limitations around them. They can still try to innovate and make something better.

(Excerpts from a discussion among festival organisers)

Photo by Marios Lepouri. Courtesy of Open House Greece.

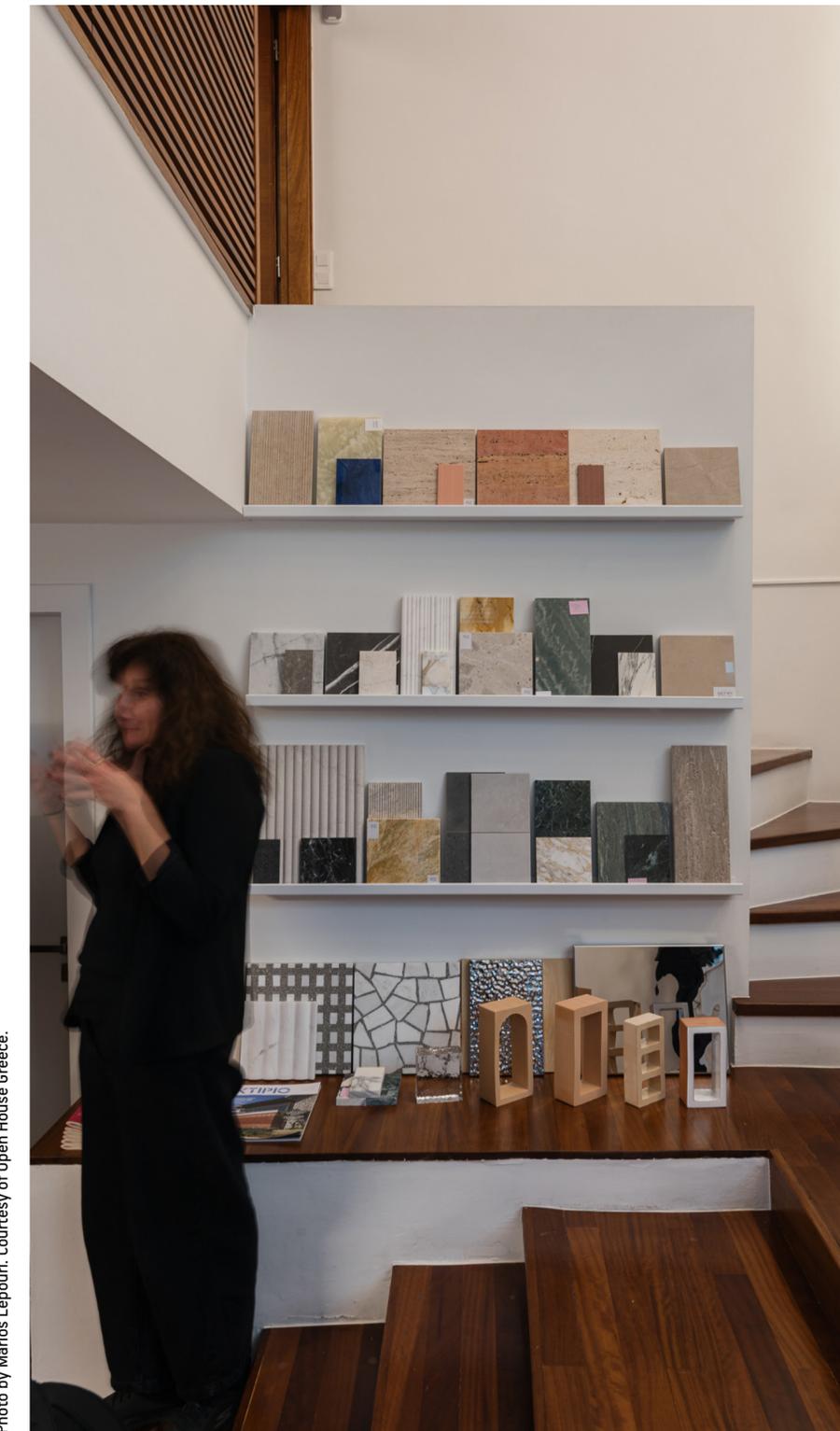




Photo by Miran Krambič. Courtesy of Open House Slovenia.

These controversies regarding the power of the profession – both assumed and real – must be reflected when involving architects in the making of tours. This is a particular issue in festivals such as OH Slovenia, where tours are often guided by architects themselves. OH Slovenia is a relatively small festival welcoming 5,000–8,000 visitors per year. It is run by a professional organisation of architects, who are involved in the presentation of buildings and can narrate their work on their own terms. The tours serve multiple purposes at once: they explain the technical and conceptual underpinnings of a project, but also act as an informal platform for visibility and professional networking. The architect steps into the role of guide, presenter, educator – and promoter. Visitors are not passive observers. They are potential clients, colleagues, advocates. This specific setup creates an opportunity for the festival to serve as a platform for the architectural community – offering a space where professionals can share their work, values and visions while engaging with a broader public.

The case of OH Slovenia demonstrates the diversity of the organisations that run these festivals, and how their public role is reflected in the final delivery of this format of event. For the architectural community in Slovenia, the OH festival functions as a platform for professionals to network with society. Thus, even if it does not take place in every case, the act of handing out business cards at the end of a tour is not incidental – it reflects the underlying logic of the event as a space for professional exposure. This dynamic turns a tour into a kind of live portfolio, in which built projects are contextualised and interpreted by their authors, creating direct access to the thinking and values behind the design. For many in the field, participation in the festival is also a form of peer recognition – an opportunity to present one's work within a community of practice. In this sense, OH Slovenia serves not only the public but also the guild of architects itself – celebrating its achievements, building solidarity and reinforcing the cultural value of architecture as a profession. The support of such a tightly knit professional community is both a strength, but also a limitation. For such a festival, based on the solidarity of the professional community, it is difficult to grow its base of volunteers. However, during its participation in OH Europe,

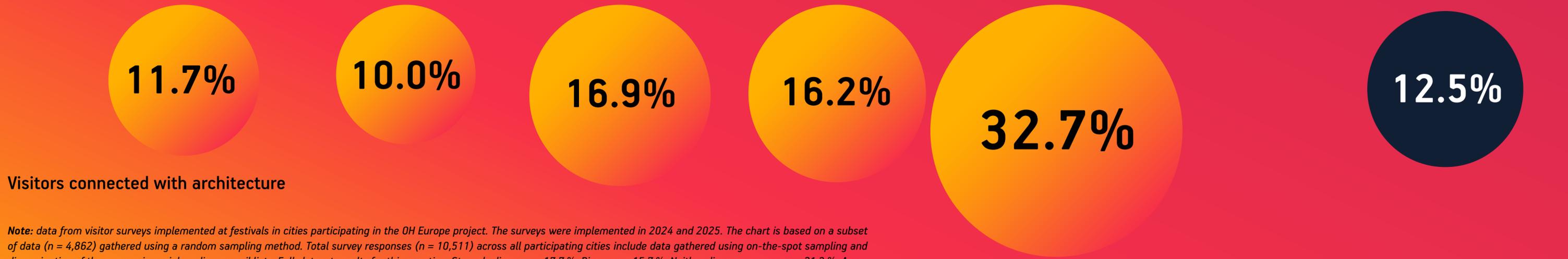
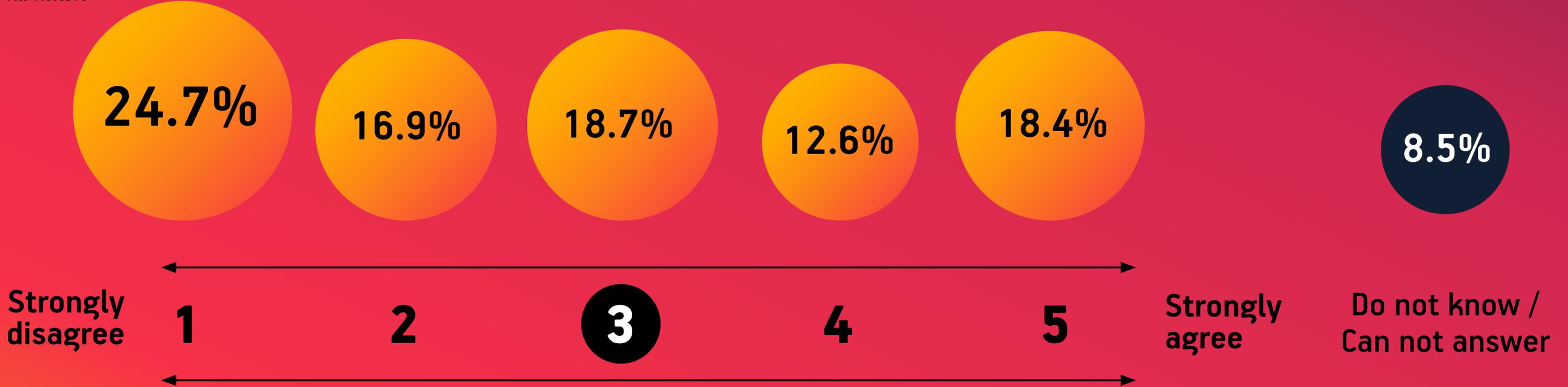
OH Slovenia has managed to significantly increase the inflow of volunteers. As a result, it has been able to expand its programme and open it up a wider public.

As part of their aim to democratise the field of architecture, OH festivals try to disconnect from the technical language of the profession by engaging audiences with personally relevant narratives about buildings or the urban environment. And although informing people about the realities of architects' work is not the primary goal of these events, they still have this effect. More than a quarter of visitors to OH events admit that the event made them think about the architect's profession. Although this effect is not evident at most events, or for the majority of visitors, it reflects an important achievement of OH Europe. Interestingly, it is individuals who already work in or are connected to architecture that are most likely to reflect on the profession because of an event – after all, these are the people most suitably positioned to hear and recognise such nuances of the message. But this effect also shows that these events create a particular resonance for this specific audience, offering a certain confirmation of their professional identities. Thus, Open House events may also work as a space for people within the industry to feel more connected with their field of work. This is especially relevant for young professionals or students, who often volunteer at events. Not only can these individuals benefit from networking opportunities, but OH events also help them to develop their newly forming professional identities. Consequently, students are another group who more often agree that an Open House event made them think about the profession of architect.

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about this Open House guided tour?

It made me think about the profession of architect

All visitors



Visitors connected with architecture

Note: data from visitor surveys implemented at festivals in cities participating in the OH Europe project. The surveys were implemented in 2024 and 2025. The chart is based on a subset of data (n = 4,862) gathered using a random sampling method. Total survey responses (n = 10,511) across all participating cities include data gathered using on-the-spot sampling and dissemination of the survey via social media or email lists. Full-dataset results for this question: Strongly disagree – 17.7 %; Disagree – 15.7 %; Neither disagree nor agree – 21.3 %; Agree – 18.3%; Strongly agree – 22.8 %; Do not know/cannot answer – 4.1 %.

This impact of Open House events on support for and the development of professional identity is also observed at the OH Slovenia festival. Here, architects are not just presenters, but also attendees. Many players and actors in the architectural field come to the festival as visitors, gathering inspiration from others' work, learning from guided tours, asking questions and observing how peers navigate spatial challenges. The festival serves as an ongoing aspect of cultural infrastructure for sharing architectural ideas. Some of these architects later return to the festival not just as guests but as contributors – opening up their own projects, offering their own interpretations and giving back to the same community that once inspired them. For example, an architect who had previously been a visitor to Open House events presented his own compact private renovation, shaped in part by ideas encountered during tours that were part of OH Slovenia. This cyclical exchange – of learning, implementing and then sharing – reflects the way OH Slovenia supports a living network of professional development. Importantly, this process is not a closed one – anyone can enter. Every visitor is a potential participant in the circulation of ideas, making the festival not just a showcase, but an open, inclusive space for collective architectural thinking. Such exchanges encourage solidarity within the field and strengthen the identity of the architectural profession at a time when it faces many challenges:

So it happens to me that when I ask, 'What do you do?' and someone says, 'I'm a doctor,' I feel like – wow, that's something I don't understand about. That's difficult. Here, the same happens for architects. People ask, 'What do you do?' and we answer, 'I'm an architect.' – 'Wow, that's difficult. I don't know anything about that.' An event like Open House helps us to feel closer to everyone else. I'm an architect. This is what we do. This is architecture. And you can be part of it. It's like getting closer, putting architecture closer to everyone.

I think what you say is really important, because the profession of the architect has seen a bit of a decline lately. Also, when I speak privately with some of my friends or people I know, I think it's an important role of our festival. We bring that idea – we try to explain to the general public that an architect is not just somebody who draws up plans exactly how the client tells them to. We do more than that. That's what makes Open House meaningful to me, I would say.

(Excerpts from a discussion among festival organisers)

Celebrating the profession of architect, nurturing recognition and respect for the achievements of the profession, may be one of the stronger impacts of Open House events. Such effects can be achieved even during events that are more popular among lay audiences – particularly during tours of public spaces such as libraries, sports halls or cultural centres, where the original architectural logic and vision behind these spaces can be introduced. At OH Slovenia, such tours are conducted by architects themselves, and act as amplifiers of the architect's voice within public culture. The festival also creates a space for long-time practitioners – retired architects, former planners and other historic figures in the field – to return to these spaces and reflect on the work of their generation. The presence of such figures brings continuity to professional memory and invites a wider audience into the lineage of architectural interpretation. Through these shared encounters, visitors are not only exposed to the technical and aesthetic choices behind built environments; they are encouraged to feel entitled to engage with architecture, to recognise its cultural value, and to speak about it with growing confidence. In a landscape where discussions about architecture are often reduced to visual aesthetics, functional necessity or simply the articulation of conflicts between the interests of developers and citizens, the festival restores the dimension of authorship – repositioning architecture as an ideas-driven part of reality and physical space, and architects as a cultural voice worth listening to.

Through their ability to celebrate architecture and the open city, such acts of recognition return prestige to the profession. The symbolic benefits of such a return have been amplified by OH Europe through its collaboration with one of the world's

most-visited online platforms for architecture, ArchDaily. This partnership has made the work of local festivals more visible beyond national contexts. As part of the collaboration, OH Europe festivals shared information about buildings that represented their curatorial focus. Meanwhile, ArchDaily journalists responded to selected cases in the form of editorial articles. This process remained informal, built on shared values rather than contractual obligations to promote the project. Such editorial independence ensured that these contributions were treated as journalistic content rather than commissioned publicity, maintaining the authenticity of both partners' missions. These publications further circulated the architectural narratives developed within OH Europe. Such efforts to make the achievements of Open House festivals visible to a wider European audience also strengthened their image locally. On several occasions, being part of a wider European initiative helped to ease a festival's access to new donors and raised greater funding. Even in the presence of stable finances, such recognition is very important to the people who make these festivals happen through their long commitment and hard work. Such acts of recognition strengthen self-esteem, a sense of social relevance and, ultimately, solidarity within the profession of architecture. The story of Laura is a perfect testimony to these social impacts. But her story shows much more about the value that these events bring to citizens.

I'M HEADING INTO

I'm heading into a warren of former industrial buildings in the heart of Lithuania's capital, Vilnius. Now populated with chic loft conversions, design studios and edgy-looking coffee bars, the area is also home to INBLUM Architects – the award-winning architectural practice of which my interviewee, Laura Malcaitė, is a partner. An actively practising architect and associate professor and head of the interior department at the Art Academy in Vilnius, Laura's practice designed the innovative wooden family home of Šarūnas – an Open House participant who generously opened the building in the leafy suburb of Žvėrynas to visitors¹. But Laura's involvement with Open House Vilnius began long before this – and the story of her engagement illustrates the impact Open House festivals bring for the common understanding between architecture professionals and the rest of the society. Laura's works that have been presented at OH Vilnius provide examples of sensitive explorations of interactions between past and present, interior and exterior, public and private. And this sensitivity is not limited to a particular function or typology; it

¹ For more about this building, please see our interview on page 40.



Photo by Andrej Vasilenko.

embraces the whole environment surrounding the buildings – including the people that live in, use or simply walk past them – as part of a living environment:

[As a practice], we made a decision not to be restricted in terms of typology. We work with both domestic and public spaces. I believe that there is always interaction between typologies... Different types of buildings inform each other. We think a lot about how people engage with the space; about how buildings engage with people. And how they fit within the urban context... As architects, we always search for language that could be understood by others.

What began in 2015 has developed into a continuing relationship with the festival. Now, her practice is part of an initiative to open up the working spaces of architects to the general public – a new format OH Vilnius festival, and one that was inspired by similar events implemented by OH Europe partners. For the second year now Laura and her colleagues run the excursions in their office and share their ideas with fellow citizens. This “hands-on” role, acting as a tour guide and meeting people, brings us to an aspect of Open House that Laura feels is particularly important – its ability to bridge the gap between the profession and the public, facilitating a conversation that enhances mutual interest and understanding.

“ It’s very important, this new initiative to open up architects’ offices, because this is the place where you can not only talk about a specific space or building that was created, but you can talk about the process... As humans, when we only see things from a distance, we simplify everything: ‘Oh, this is simple. You just draw something, and then you build it.’ But what goes on between those two steps? It’s like a mystery... It’s probably a cheesy reference, but I’m looking at the books on the shelf now. You see a book and you can judge the cover... But to really understand it, you have to open the book. When you open a building, you open up your mind to the philosophy behind it.

Laura believes these interactions that take place as part of Open House festivals are really opening that “black box”,

unlocking this mystery of architects’ processes. This is an essential part of Open House for Laura. But it’s equally vital that the conversation is not one-sided: through Open House, she says, architects gain an opportunity not just to educate, but to understand public perceptions of architects and of their work. This includes encountering and discussing attitudes and opinions that can lead to resistance or even hostility to some aspects of modern architecture, or to buildings and places with complex or contested histories.

“ I believe a lot of people come to some buildings or spaces precisely for this reason – not because they adore a building, but because they have a critical point of view and they are trying to understand it... Starting from there, you can have a discussion. Especially about buildings that are not being used any more, or kind of alienated not only in terms of function, but also in terms of perceptions.

Laura notices that issues such as whether to build new instead of reconstructing, changing the function of existing buildings or adapting them to new or changed needs – these questions are becoming the main narrative in the architectural field. It’s important to talk about them not just within the profession, but also to bring these questions to the public, so that everyone can be on the same page. Such an understanding of the importance of public engagement, Laura says, isn’t the kind of things you can pick up from a textbook or in a lecture theatre. By inviting architects and the public to share a space, providing a physical, experiential

sense of the built environment, Open House helps to open up not just the buildings themselves, but a space to talk about, understand and even celebrate architecture. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the way it provides a way to step inside spaces that are not usually accessible to the public. In this sense, Laura herself shares the same curiosity and passion common to most Open House visitors:

“ I have this guilty pleasure. I don’t know if it’s a professional thing or personal, but let’s say I’m really fascinated by being on the street in the evening when it’s dark. Seeing through the windows at what is happening inside; how people act and what they do... It probably comes back once again to my practice, because a building itself is nothing without its interaction with the human or non-human.

Laura shares this with a hearty laugh, but it’s a serious point – opening up buildings provides a way to understand ourselves. She believes that opening up the spaces we live in is more than just the simple physical act of opening a door. You don’t just open the door; you open up the stories behind it. However, she’s quick to acknowledge that the act of opening is not necessarily sufficient for a successful dialogue. Communicating with the public is not always straightforward, because some architects are very introspective. Laura thinks that it’s not that they dislike speaking to the public, but rather that they often don’t know how to – or don’t feel the need to. Sometimes, spaces speak for themselves. And in certain cases, it can be even more interesting to introduce other voices

or alternative means through which spaces are experienced, rather than having them narrated by the author. She feels that overall, efforts of Open House are part of a wider process of breaking down the silos that separates the profession from society. She observes important changes in this regard:

“ The architect’s position in society is no longer the one who dictates what people need. There is no hierarchy any more. As an architectural community, we totally understand we can’t look down from the top. We have to be inside. Otherwise you will be talking as if you’re from another planet, and will probably never be understood. To understand the needs, you have to be there - among people.

Looking at the tangible results she has witnessed over the years, Laura is positive about the impacts of OH Vilnius. She believes that the event has contributed significantly to changing people's perceptions of the profession and the city. Laura says she can see the difference among those members of the public who have engaged with OH Vilnius. Especially among clients, who embrace an understanding that everything you build together with an architect has to bring value – not just to themselves, but also to the city, to the public, to the future. One of the key reasons for the festival's strength, Laura says, is its scale. OH Vilnius has grown steadily over the years, with its 2025 edition attracting almost 43,000 visits over two days. Since joining the Open House Europe network in 2021, the festival's scope has widened to embrace issues such as social and cultural inclusion – the 2024 edition paid special attention to accessibility for people with various mobility needs, as well as offering tours in English and Ukrainian. Underlying all of these developments, Laura sees a serious civic engagement:

“ It involves hundreds of people. It's a huge community that cares. And it's not just the numbers, but the scale of involvement. You can feel it. And the will to tell the stories and make a connection between people and architecture. And even though it's on a big scale, it's very sensitive. It's very hard to achieve that sensitivity. So for me, it's also very personal. From a wider perspective, it has a huge educational value that you can't create in any institution.”

Because she is also an educator, Laura feels a great joy while observing these impacts of Open House festivals. She has noticed a lot of families coming to the excursions.

She believes the festival will have a significant imprint on participating youth, and will add to intergenerational exchange of knowledge. Laura is especially happy that students play an active role in delivering the festival. And it is not just students of architecture or design, but also students from other fields, and in general, people from other fields of knowledge, who volunteer in events and become mentors. This brings interdisciplinary interaction, creating a kind of school or university, but an informal one. Many people come to the festival from other cities, so it is not only Vilnius that is enriched. As she shares these thoughts, Laura's eyes light up with enthusiasm and joy:

“ It's one of most important events for me and a big part of the community. I have a joke that in our office, there are two big events a year: one is Christmas and the other is Open House. That says a lot. Yeah, of course it gives me joy. Maybe because of the opportunity to have this dialogue with people and to get to know our city better. I also enjoy how there are a lot of non-architects involved in the event.”

As we wrap up, I ask Laura what thing stands out most about Open House for her. She mentions openness and a kind of informal spirit, which makes it refreshingly real. “You can feel it in your bones.” she says.



Photo by Andrej Vasilenko.

**BUILDING
BRIDGES:
BETWEEN
ARCHITECTS
AND SOCIETY**

Laura's thoughts function as a perfect summary of the findings presented in this report, showing how the experience of an Open House festival is just as impactful for professionals as it is for the public. Her story also testifies to the social value of opening up buildings. But the truth is that Open House is also a logistically complicated cultural event. Producing such an event consumes immense amounts of energy, and requires both professionalism and a love for one's city. And yet many professionals from across Europe and the world continue this journey of opening exceptional houses and places to common people, year after year. OH Europe has provided these people with the space to celebrate their professional identity and help each other grow:

Finally, we can feel that we are not alone... that others might have faced the same problems and the same issues. And there are many ways to solve them... We are a big community, a big network. That's a powerful thing. Also, there's the human perspective of it, not just the organisational. Every year, we bring something new, and it helps us to think about the trajectory of everything that we have achieved.

(Representative of a partner organisation)

Throughout the pages of this report, we have presented our main findings about the social impacts of the OH Europe initiative. The final step in this process is to provide recommendations. Recommendations from an outsider concerning future actions can be much less productive than evaluative insights based on observations of past activities. As we have acknowledged throughout the report, a significant part of the success of Open House is down to the work of the organisers, volunteers and participants who bring these festivals to life. Therefore, it is first and foremost the independent organisations that make up OH Europe who should imagine their future. Nevertheless, we would like to contribute two suggestions to the debate on how this partnership can evolve.

Photo by Ste Murray. Courtesy of Open House Dublin.



OH EUROPE SHOULD RESPOND TO THE DIVERSITY OF ITS PARTNERS SITUATIONS

OH Europe possesses all the features of a successful European project. Meetings between partners have established productive flows of knowledge exchange. Festival organisers have learned how to mobilise wider volunteer support for their events. In addition, they have leveraged the international contacts of OH Europe to provide opportunities for international exchanges by their most committed volunteers. This cycle of sharing ideas has spanned from exchanging thoughts about how to develop consistent and deep curatorial concepts, to how to secure private funding for the enlargement of events. Participation in OH Europe has encouraged partners to improve their monitoring practices. It has also provided a space for critical reflection about those audiences that the festivals have already reached, but also those that could be approached in the future. This collective of partners has been a space in which individual festivals were supported in their efforts to attain greater social inclusivity. This was achieved through the exchange of practices, but more importantly, – through the common values shared among the partners of the project:

...as professionals, we really loved this exchange of good practices. It helped us to really try to see what we could improve in our festivals. We get to meet all of these great people who are also working on festivals in different locations throughout Europe. It's really good to get to know somebody else who shares this vision and these values, who understands what you are trying to do locally and is also trying to do it somewhere else. So it's a good motivation to talk to somebody else who also has the same problems.

(Representative of a partner organisation)

All of these benefits of exchange contribute to the increased social impact of the festivals. This effect is a collective one, and OH Europe has helped the festivals to achieve more than they could on their own. Such benefits became clearly visible when we tracked the individual impacts of the exchanges. Such impacts represent a sufficient motive to continue public funding of this initiative in the future. A simple and predictable recommendation in this type of evaluation would be to suggest amending the network's repertoire of activities by dropping a few less effective ones and increasing the scope of the most successful ones. But such a technical suggestion would not give truth to the real source of value in this partnership. This value lies in the diversity of the contextual situations of the partners. In some ways, OH Europe is a fruitful merger of two extremes. On the one hand, all of the organisations involved are implementing architectural events according to the same cultural franchise, and thus face very similar operational tasks and related challenges.



Photo by Ste Murray. Courtesy of Open House Dublin.

On the other hand, these organisations differ significantly in terms of their size, experience, status and position in the cultural field at large or in the field of architecture in particular. As a result, OH Europe is an environment in which organisations see themselves almost as if in some kind of time machine. The more established festivals can witness the foundational steps of new festivals entering into this endeavour with a new energy and at a new time. Meanwhile, these new festivals can see the various outcomes and positions that the strategic paths they are taking in the present could lead to. This is equally valuable for experienced and new festivals alike, because this environment encourages a strategic observation of each festival's position and a reflection on the possible ways it can develop:

I think that what Open House Europe actually provided us with is the tools for interconnection and communication, as well as creating and brainstorming new ideas. Because this is something we've been missing since we introduced the festival in [our city]. Now we already have some tools and structured communication, and we all can bring this together. This is really powerful.

(Representative of a partner organisation)

Overall, the diverse situations of the organisations involved in delivering Open House festivals should be seen as a unique resource. Not only are the cultural and political situations in different cities diverse, but so too are the economic and human capacities of different organisations, as well as the normative directions towards which particular organisations find it is easier to gravitate. Throughout these three years, OH Europe has developed a set of common tools and exchange formats that work. Nevertheless, the most effective exchanges happen

between partners on a one-to-one basis. This suggests the need to further develop formats that would enable the network to better to respond to the diversity of situations that partner organisations find themselves in, or the strategic directions that they wish to commit to. This observation does not imply the need for any major reworking of exchange formats. Rather, it invites us to rethink the existing formats through the lens of peer-to-peer learning. For example, volunteer exchange has proved to be an effective initiative for mobilising volunteers and exchanging the knowledge they have accumulated. But making targeted exchanges between partners who are at an advanced stage in a specific, strategically relevant practice would be even more worthwhile. Creating opportunities for the employees of organisations to participate in targeted field trips to observe other partners' practices would be an example of moving towards such targeted peer-to-peer learning.

OH EUROPE COULD DEVELOP ITS ACTIVITIES ON THE BASIS OF ITS UNIQUE SOCIETAL IMPACTS

One of the reasons why the benefits of knowledge exchange in OH Europe have been strong is because all of the festivals work under the umbrella of the same cultural franchise. For this reason, they are bound by very similar practical experiences, which they can reflect upon, making them a true community of practice. This common experience has made exchanges between network partners focused and efficient. But the previous insight that the diversity of the participating organisations is an important resource for OH Europe also brings us to the question of scale. If diversity is the vital resource for the network, expanding the network can only be a natural direction. Here, it has to be noted that there is a fairly clear limit to the extent to which “big is beautiful”. Some social impacts of OH Europe have expanded only because there was a limited group of partners, who could agree on the key values of their activities – and also because there was public funding available to those partners who committed to them. Many important social impacts of OH Europe relate to the common normative programming of partners’ activities, which enable them highlight problematic realities in the contemporary development of cities, together with the role that architects and urbanists play in solving these problems. OH Europe has challenged partners to address common

curatorial topics, encouraging them to enter into territories of public debate that were not necessarily usual for the partners involved. Once again, the OH Europe partnership functioned as a space in which festivals could learn how to present the suggested topics. More importantly, it is public funding that has enabled the streamlining of these topics into the programmes of individual festivals.

The formats of Open House events disseminated through the franchise has, in itself, inscribed the values of the democratisation of architecture. But this does not necessarily lead to further advocacy for the changes that are essential to achieving a higher quality of space. OH Europe has managed to motivate partners to move in this direction. The partners were encouraged to capitalise on social impacts of Open House events such as strengthened identification with a city and a sense of care for one’s own city, as well as a better understanding of the role and professional realities of architects. OH Europe has supported the individual efforts of festivals in building bridges between architects and the rest of the society. For such bridges to be built and maintained, there is a constant need to strengthen the foundations on each of the bank of this river. In the differing contexts of partner cities,

these foundations of common understanding between the public and professionals are in highly divergent states. Certain challenges are, however, very common. On one side, there is a profession that uses highly technical language and has a special relationship with those who have the power to build. This side needs to be prepared for and opened up to democratic debate about their work. On the other side, there are lay citizens who need to nurture their curiosity and open up to the controversies that exist in the art of building, and which are unavoidable due to constant technological, political and economic change. Facing up to such thoughts is no longer a matter of light entertainment, but an invitation to civic engagement. OH Europe has invited the partners to take this direction.

The possibilities for the activities implemented by OH partners to achieve these wider societal impacts are related to one unique quality of the communities that implementing these events. Through their engagement, the volunteers and the most loyal audiences of these festivals are informed and sensitised to core architectural questions to the extent that they can contribute effectively to public debate about the politics of space. Unlike the usual actors of such debates, these people are not architecture professionals, but lay citizens – the very people who will have to live with the decisions made about the development of their living environment. More importantly, the international scale of the network enables their voices to be amplified. In this way, OH Europe brings attention to the global dimensions that surround issues relating to the development of living environments, advancing the aim of achieving solidarity between professionals and citizens across national borders. These communities create the possibility for informed citizens to have a voice, and OH Europe provides a channel to raise these voices to the European level. The possibilities of this setting thus go far beyond of what was achieved in Visual stories exhibitions. In the context of political developments such as the launch of the New European Bauhaus initiative or the appointment of a European Commissioner for Housing, opportunities for the voices of European citizens to be heard are now more relevant than ever. The fact that partnerships similar to OH Europe are also anticipated in Australia and Latin America also suggests

the global relevance of involving citizens in a debate about the future of our cities. The unique quality of OH Europe, which makes it an example to be followed, is that it creates a space in which the voices of informed non-professional citizens can be amplified and heard. Building on such unique social qualities – and the impacts that follow from them – could be an important alternative when discussing the further development of the network.

Taking this idea to its extreme would lead us to question the need to build such partnerships within the limits of the Open House franchise alone. After all, there are other cultural formats and initiatives that aim to create the exactly the same social impacts of opening up public debate about architecture and the urban environment. In fact, for some of the current partner organisations, Open House is just one of the formats they work with. Thus, Open House may not be the only format or practice that acts as an effective intermediary in building alliances among international partners working for the democratisation of architecture in very different cultural and political contexts. Nevertheless, the common practice of creating an Open House festival has proved to be an effective starting point for building such partnerships:

We truly value being part of the Open House Europe network. It is both inspiring and challenging, as it pushes us to reflect on our own way of working and to learn from others. Despite the difficulties of adapting well-established processes, we see this collaboration as an opportunity to grow, improve and bring fresh ideas into our local context. We’re eager to keep contributing, sharing experiences and supporting initiatives that strengthen the network as a whole.

(Representative of a partner organisation)

Building an effective international partnership, which involves sharing a workload and resources, is not a simple endeavour. The fact that OH Europe has managed to achieve such results demonstrates the value of targeted activities by a community of practice. It also proves the worth of a value-driven partnership. In theory, some of the activities of OH Europe (e.g. common events or volunteer exchange) could have been offered by OH Worldwide. This global franchise would be a fairly natural source for funding minimal networking between Open House festivals across the world. Such a service could also be an addition option for those organisations that can afford larger financial contributions. Further directions for the development of the OH Europe initiative should be considered in relation to the capacities and plans of OH Worldwide, which issues the franchise for this format of architectural events. But the reality is that the financial capacities of OH festivals are as diverse as the contexts in which they operate. For many of these organisations, more extensive networking activities would require public funding. Thus, such a move would also require attention to be paid to the objectives pursued by public donors. OH Europe should react to these opportunities, bearing in mind the unique social impacts that this partnership manages to produce. While the cultural and political diversity of the contexts in which partners operate is a resource, the sheer range of contexts is also what makes smaller partnerships more feasible and more likely to capitalise on the social impacts they produce. A certain “clustering” of organisations that face similar challenges or share a like-minded take on their operations would be helpful, in order to further develop the organic partnership within this collective. In other words, set against more global alternatives, in the quest of building value-driven partnerships – small is often the most beautiful.

Photo by Ste Murray. Courtesy of Open House Dublin.



(C
HC
EURC

)PEN
)USE
)PE

(

)