ekip Policy Lab

Cultural heritage institutions within open innovation ecosystems

Scoping paper

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon (2021-2027) Research and Innovation programme under grant agreement No. 101112111

1. Introduction

This scoping document provides the analytical baseline for the *ekip* Policy Lab #8, which is designed to strengthen the capacity of Cultural Heritage Institutions (CHIs) to engage in complex innovation processes and contribute to the development of open innovation ecosystems across Europe. The document supports the broader ambition of *ekip* by helping to create the conditions for more inclusive, collaborative, and systemic innovation dynamics, especially in response to the green and digital transitions and other pressing societal challenges.

By mapping the needs, barriers, and enabling factors that shape the innovation potential of CHIs, the scoping document lays the groundwork for identifying specific policy challenges to be addressed in subsequent phases of the Policy Labs. It reflects an understanding of innovation not as a purely technological or market-driven process, but as one grounded in social, cultural, and institutional contexts. As such, it aims to support policy experimentation that recognises the unique assets and values of CHIs while addressing their structural constraints.

The document is structured to guide both diagnosis and action. Chapter 2 outlines the policy problem and clarifies key definitions, followed by a short historical contextualisation and an explanation of the methodology used. It then presents the main challenges and opportunities facing CHIs in innovation ecosystems, drawing from fieldwork, stakeholder engagement, and literature. Chapter 3 translates the findings into a set of problem statements, a policy vision, and a series of strategic objectives that frame the intervention logic.

Chapter 4 analyses the broader policy and regulatory environment, with particular attention to relevant EU frameworks, current instruments, and emerging trends that influence the capacity of CHIs to innovate. Chapter 5 describes the diagnostic framework based on seven building blocks: sustainable competitiveness, regulation and governance, social dimension, research and innovation, infrastructures, skills, and investment and funding, which provide a coherent structure for identifying gaps and levers for change. Each block is supported by practical examples, potential indicators, and policy recommendations.

Chapter 6 includes a literature review, a list of references, and two annexes: a compilation of interviews conducted and a typology outlining the various roles CHIs can play within open innovation ecosystems. Taken together, these components provide a shared foundation for the *ekip* Labs to develop context-sensitive, forward-looking policy proposals that better integrate CHIs into Europe's evolving innovation landscape.

2. Policy problem

Cultural heritage institutions (CHIs) are facing growing demands to contribute to major societal goals: social cohesion, sustainability, and democratic participation (Wilson, 2019; Guttormsen & Swensen, 2017). These expectations come at a time when the whole cultural sector is structurally under-resourced but politically over-demanded. Despite decades of community engagement and care-based practice, CHIs are often absent from innovation policy agendas. They remain framed as custodians of the past, rather than as agents of change (Shepherd, 2023). Many operate within precarious funding models, rigid institutional structures, and disconnected policy silos. The result is a missed opportunity to unlock their full potential in building more inclusive and participatory futures.

At the centre of the problem lies a mismatch between dominant innovation discourses and the way innovation happens in CHIs. Policymakers often associate innovation with speed, scale, and novelty. In contrast, heritage professionals describe it as a slow, relational, and situated process. It emerges through trust, dialogue, and experimentation. Many do not even identify themselves as innovators. They distance themselves from technical language like "upskilling" or "transformation". Innovation, in their view, is not a goal but a by-product of engaging with communities and addressing shared problems. For some it is even difficult to discern between innovation tasks and their main job as heritage managers. Research shows that innovation in CHIs often stems not from the introduction of new technologies, but from sustained co-design processes that reshape institutional mindsets and enable deeper organisational change (Ciolfi et al., 2019).

These tensions have real consequences. Small and community-based institutions are particularly exposed. They face structural barriers like low visibility, lack of access to funding, and unfit metrics that fail to capture the value they generate. Many work without the recognition or resources needed to sustain innovation over time. Their contributions to social wellbeing, civic agency, or environmental awareness are often invisible in standard evaluation systems, which rarely account for the dynamic feedback loops between heritage projects and their socio-cultural contexts (Żbikowska et al., 2024,). Some find ways to resist or adapt. But many are forced to conform to models that do not reflect their missions or values.

CHIs often act as connectors. They bridge policy and practice, local knowledge and expert discourse, memory and experimentation. These roles are essential for building strong innovation ecosystems. Yet they are rarely supported. Intermediary institutions, especially those working in rural or underserved areas, face operational and institutional fragility. They lack capacity to take risks. They are not treated as strategic partners. Bureaucratic cultures and top-down decision-making structures limit their ability to collaborate across fields or respond to change.

The notion of "intermediary institutions" is borrowed from policy fields far removed from culture like manufacturing and industrial innovation, where it has proven essential for understanding how collaboration, experimentation, and knowledge exchange happen across sectors. Recent studies have shown how intermediaries foster trust-building, social capital, and co-created knowledge transfer between actors with divergent cultures and resources (Elavathingal, 2025). Applying this lens to cultural heritage allows us to conceptualise CHIs not just as service providers or venues, but as orchestration nodes that mediate between diverse actors and agendas.

To tackle these challenges, we adopt an *open innovation ecosystem* perspective. This approach shifts the focus from isolated institutions or linear innovation pipelines to the broader networks, relationships, and infrastructures that enable collective problem-solving and long-term transformation (The Good Shift et al., 2024). It allows us to move beyond narrowly defined outputs or competition-based funding models, and to recognise the diversity of actors, roles, and forms of value that characterise heritage innovation. Understanding where and how CHIs operate within these ecosystems, what roles they play, what constraints they face, and what support they need, is a crucial first step towards better recognition. It opens up new possibilities for policymaking that is less about scaling singular solutions and more about cultivating the conditions for collaboration, experimentation, and resilience across contexts.

This *ekip* Policy Lab will examine how to recognise and strengthen the role of CHIs in innovation ecosystems. It will explore how policies can support innovation as a social and embedded process. Key questions include: How can we develop better indicators of impact? How do we support community-rooted innovation without imposing standardised models? How can CHIs be empowered as equal partners in shaping transitions? The goal is to assess the role of CHIs in innovation policy and to build a more inclusive, open, and sustainable cultural policy framework. One that values depth over scale and learning over speed.

Definitions

This scoping note is prepared in line with the Council of the European Union's definition of cultural heritage:

Cultural Heritage

> *"Cultural heritage consists of the resources inherited from the past in all forms and aspects - tangible, intangible and digital (born digital and digitized), including monuments, sites, landscapes, skills, practices, knowledge and expressions of human creativity, as well as collections conserved and managed by public and private bodies such as museums, libraries and archives. It originates from the interaction between people and places through time and it is constantly evolving. These resources are of great value to society from a cultural, environmental, social and economic point of view and thus their sustainable management constitutes a strategic choice for the 21st century."*[1]

At the same time it benefits from the work and definition around heritage and innovation from the ILUCIDARE project.

Heritage-led innovation

> *Heritage-led innovation is the implementation of a new idea involving heritage that results in an improvement. The basis of the innovation process is new knowledge, which is often an intersecting of disciplines and ideas. The aim of the innovation is creating value or improving existing conditions. The innovation needs to be implemented, put into use or made available for others to use. The success of an innovation is determined by the market or larger society, which decide whether an idea or vision is truly new and whether it is an improvement against the current situation.* (ILUCIDARE project, 2020)

Cultural heritage institution (CHI)

[1] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52014XG0614(08)&from=FR

Cultural heritage institutions play a central role in safeguarding and providing access to Europe's cultural assets. In the context of EU policy, they are defined as organisations that hold permanent collections of works or other subject-matter and make them publicly accessible. This category includes publicly accessible libraries and museums (regardless of the nature of their collections), archives, film or audio heritage institutions, as well as national libraries and national archives. It also extends, where relevant, to the archival or publicly accessible library functions of educational establishments, research organisations and public-sector broadcasting organisations. This broad definition reflects the diversity of institutions that contribute to preservation, access, knowledge-building and innovation within Europe's cultural and creative ecosystems (Directive (EU) 2019/790, 2019).

Short history

Cultural heritage has increasingly entered the policy spotlight as a resource for addressing the social, environmental, and democratic challenges of the 21st century. Traditionally viewed as a domain of conservation, cultural heritage is now recognised for its potential to foster innovation, inclusion, and community resilience. This evolution reflects broader shifts in EU priorities, from economic growth to sustainability, cohesion, and systems-level transformation. In this context, the role of cultural heritage institutions (CHIs) is receiving renewed attention within both cultural and innovation policy agendas.

The relationship between heritage and innovation has developed gradually. In earlier decades, heritage was largely approached through frameworks of preservation (Faro Convention, 2005), education, and tourism. Innovation was framed in technological or economic terms, often disconnected from the social and cultural dimensions of heritage. Local experiments in participatory practice or community engagement existed, but they remained marginal in policymaking and funding strategies. CHIs that tested new models such as ecomuseums, citizen-led archives, or experimental libraries were often seen as exceptions rather than structural components of innovation ecosystems. Importantly, the very concept of *innovation* remains highly contested within the heritage sector and the broader cultural and creative sectors (CCS), where its application can evoke tensions between tradition, values, and market-oriented logics (Wijngaarden et al., 2016,).

In the 2010s, this began to change. The 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage introduced a broader vision of heritage as a shared responsibility and living resource. Around the same time, Horizon 2020-funded projects such as ILUCIDARE and OpenHeritage framed heritage as a driver of inclusive and place-based innovation. Policy debates around the green and digital transitions increasingly cited heritage as a cultural infrastructure capable of supporting long-term transformation. This framing was reinforced by the launch of the *New European Bauhaus*, which positioned architecture, design, heritage, aesthetics, and sustainability at the centre of the EU's ecological and social ambitions. Similarly, the *EIT Culture & Creativity* Knowledge and Innovation Community (KIC), launched in 2023, further embedded cultural and creative sectors into the EU's innovation agenda offering new frameworks for cross-sector collaboration and entrepreneurship in heritage contexts.

Despite this momentum, structural gaps remain. Many CHIs lack access to funding models that reward slow, embedded, or relational forms of innovation. Evaluation systems continue to prioritise

visibility and scalability over long-term impact or community agency. The absence of typologies, shared indicators, and strategic recognition limits how CHIs contribute to broader innovation ecosystems (Fernández Fernández, 2016).

Today, CHIs are increasingly seen as mediators, connectors, and civic infrastructures. Their work addresses climate adaptation, social inclusion, and cultural rights, often through collaborative and experimental means. Yet the systems around them are still catching up. This calls for policy approaches that align with the actual practices of heritage-led innovation and that position CHIs not only as guardians of memory but also as enablers of transition, participation, and better futures.

Methodology

This scoping note follows a grounded and exploratory methodology, combining desk research, expert interviews, and practice-based observation. Rather than offering an exhaustive mapping of heritage-led innovation, its goal is to identify enabling conditions, structural barriers, and potential policy inputs to better support cultural heritage institutions (CHIs) within open innovation ecosystems.

Our approach is inspired by grounded methodologies in cultural research, such as those used by Grau Pérez (2025) when exploring enabling conditions for artistic research. Grounded theory is particularly suited to domains where knowledge is limited, concepts are contested, and practice often preceded formal theorisation, as it is the case in the cultural sector (Wijngaarden et al., 2016,), and heritage most specifically. The aim of the grounded approach is to uncover underlying processes within a particular field, developing theoretical insights directly from empirical research rather than imposing pre-existing conceptual frameworks. This bottom-up logic underpins our effort to bridge gaps between heritage practice, innovation discourse, and policymaking.

The methodology unfolded in four phases:

1. **Desk research, literature review and social listening**

   We conducted an extensive review of academic and grey literature across cultural policy, research and innovation studies. We also analysed outputs from various European projects like ILUCIDARE, Cultural Labs, OpenHeritage, HeritACT, etc. The desk review included cross-sectoral insights from adjacent fields (e.g. manufacturing and design) where roles like "innovation intermediary" have been more clearly conceptualised. These perspectives were especially useful for the development of our typology of institutional roles.

   In parallel, we incorporated results from social listening and trend forecasting conducted by *ekip* partner Nextatlas. Their analysis of online conversations helped us identify emerging signals, trend clusters, and potential futures relevant to cultural heritage and innovation. The data provided by Nextatlas offered an external validation layer and a forward-looking lens, enriching our desk research with real-time, user-generated insights into how innovation in heritage is perceived and discussed beyond academic or institutional circles.

2. **Semi-structured interviews**

   We held 16 qualitative interviews with professionals working at the intersection of heritage, innovation, and policy. Participants included project leads, innovation experts, institutional representatives, researchers, heritage managers and practitioners involved in EU-funded

projects or grassroots initiatives. The interviews explored how innovation is defined and enacted in CHIs, the tensions they face, and the forms of support they consider most relevant. Data were analysed thematically, drawing attention to recurring dynamics such as collaboration, friction, and institutional fragility

3. **Practice observation**

   We facilitated two workshop sessions as part of the research process, which helped surface tacit knowledge and context-specific insights that often remained undocumented in formal publications.

   The first was held within *ekip* Policy Corner, a space for peer exchange and collaborative reflection. This session allowed us to validate, confront, and further develop initial insights from the social listening process engaging directly with a diverse group of practitioners and researchers through a future thinking exercise.

   The second took place at the Cultural Action Europe Conference BEYOND 2025, in Turin (June 2025), In this hands-on session participants co-created fictional cultural heritage institutions and explored how concrete policy dynamics, drawn from our interviews, would affect them. This exercise enabled us to test the resonance, clarity, and practical relevance of our analytical framework, as well as to refine it based on shared reflection.

4. **Policy trend analysis**

   Finally, we conducted a focused policy trend analysis of the main EU legislative regulatory, and funding instruments that currently shape the innovation landscape as it relates to culture and heritage. This included Creative Europe, Horizon Europe, the New European Bauhaus, and the European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT). We contrasted these policy trajectories with the findings from interviews and workshops, identifying alignments, gaps, and opportunities. This comparative step helped refine our understanding of the structural tensions between innovation policy narratives and heritage practice.

Limitations

Grounded research brings with it a strong sense of responsibility particularly when engaging with practitioners whose time, resources, and capacities are often stretched. As full exhaustiveness is neither feasible nor desirable in this kind of exploratory scoping, the selection of actors and practices inevitably reflects partial perspectives and must be accountable for its own positionalities and biases.

One important limitation concerns accessibility. Not all actors within the ecosystem are equally positioned to participate in interviews, workshops, or research-related activities. Precarious working conditions, limited time, institutional overload, and language barriers can restrict who gets represented and how. These structural barriers disproportionately affect grassroots initiatives, volunteer-run institutions, and smaller CHIs that remain disconnected from EU policy circles or research networks.

Language is another critical filter. There is a persistent risk of disproportionately amplifying English-speaking, well-networked innovation practices, while systematically overlooking community-based or locally-rooted work that does not circulate through dominant policy and research channels. To address this, we conducted interviews in five different languages: English, French,

Italian, Spanish, and Catalan, in an effort to include more diverse voices. Our English-language interviews also incorporated perspectives from heritage and innovation actors in Eastern European countries such as Romania and Serbia. However, we acknowledge that these efforts are not sufficient to fully overcome entrenched patterns of visibility and access. It remains far easier to reach well-funded researchers than to engage with practitioners running cultural initiatives on a voluntary basis.

Challenges & opportunities

Opportunities

The cultural heritage sector is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by new expectations, systemic pressures, and emerging forms of public engagement. As heritage institutions reframe their roles within society, opportunities are arising to position them as strategic actors within open innovation ecosystems. These opportunities are not solely technological but involve deeper societal and cultural shifts. Based on extensive interviews, policy dialogues, and ecosystem analysis, three main opportunity areas have been identified:

- Recognising CHIs as strategic actors in social innovation
- Fostering cross-sectoral collaboration through heritage-led innovation
- Developing meaningful indicators to assess cultural and social value

Each of these areas represents a pathway towards a more inclusive, responsive, and systemic approach to innovation.

1. Recognising CHIs as strategic actors in social innovation

Cultural heritage institutions (CHIs) are increasingly moving beyond their traditional functions of preservation and curation, and emerging as community-embedded spaces for learning, reflection, and civic transformation. In the face of complex societal challenges such as social fragmentation, climate change, and democratic disaffection, CHIs are activating their resources, physical, digital, and relational, to foster collective agency. However, this innovation is often invisible to policy frameworks that remain biased towards technological or market-driven interpretations of change. As interviews revealed, CHIs frequently do not identify themselves as innovation agents, especially when innovation is framed in technical or economic terms. Social innovation in heritage tends to be slow, embedded, and relational, qualities that are difficult to capture through mainstream innovation policy language but are essential for systemic transformation. Bringing social innovation values into technological domains such as reframing AI as a cultural and societal transition, can lead to more inclusive and participatory innovation approaches.

Key focus areas:

- Facilitating self-recognition and capacity-building among CHIs to articulate their contributions within innovation policies and broader transformation agendas
- Supporting inclusive, participatory approaches such as co-creation, co-ownership, and living labs, that link cultural heritage to collective memory, social repair, and sustainable innovation.

- Aligning innovation policies with heritage-based forms of responsiveness, care, and long-term visioning.
- Facilitating self-recognition and capacity-building among CHIs to articulate their contributions to innovation.
- Promoting leadership models that embed CHIs within local innovation agendas and transitions.
- Promote innovation beyond new business models.
- Encouraging policy frameworks that integrate social innovation values into technological innovation agendas.

2. Fostering cross-sectoral collaboration through heritage-led innovation

Heritage institutions increasingly operate beyond the cultural sector, engaging in issues such as territorial cohesion, demographic change, environmental sustainability, and democratic participation. Despite this, they are rarely treated as equal partners in innovation policy or ecosystem design. Structural silos between policy domains (e.g., culture, innovation, and social policy) prevent the recognition of the civic and strategic value CHIs offer. Their long-term, place-based knowledge and convening capacity make them vital contributors to systemic innovation bringing cultural depth and social meaning to otherwise technocratic or market-led processes. This collaborative potential remains underdeveloped and underfunded. Instead of being seen as passive repositories or communication tools, CHIs should be acknowledged and supported as co-leaders in ecosystem transitions, with the ability to bridge sectors and shape cross-disciplinary agendas.

Key focus areas:

- Developing policy frameworks that position CHIs as equal actors in cross-sectoral innovation partnerships.
- Encouraging collaboration between CHIs and sectors such as education, urban development, public health, and environmental planning.
- Building peer-learning networks and horizontal exchanges between communities, institutions, and practitioners.
- Supporting experimentation spaces that facilitate cross-sector dialogue, trust-building, and relational governance.
- Providing incentives for co-produced projects that integrate cultural heritage into broader policy agendas.
- Support flexible funding to support CHIs as key players in innovation across different sectors and areas of society,

3. Developing meaningful indicators to assess cultural and social value

Cultural heritage institutions face increasing pressure to demonstrate their impact through quantifiable metrics. Yet the dominant indicators, focused on growth, visibility, and audience size fail to reflect the transformative, collective, and relational dimensions of heritage-based innovation. Without better tools, funding and policy will continue to favour conventional, low-risk and short-term projects, marginalising the systemic potential of heritage institutions. Interviewees stressed the need for metrics that acknowledge the pace, complexity, and embeddedness of social innovation. Many impacts such as community empowerment, knowledge co-production, or intergenerational dialogue, unfold over long periods and resist reductive measurement.

Additionally, because social innovation is deeply embedded in local contexts, many of its outcomes are shaped by variables beyond the control of the institution itself. However, these external challenges are also internal opportunities for heritage institutions to intervene, adapt, and lead systemic change. One way to address this is through the use of innovation portfolios, which allow institutions to take a long-term, strategic view of impact, connecting diverse initiatives that collectively contribute to systemic change.[2]

Key focus areas:

- Co-creating qualitative and mixed-method indicators that reflect civic, relational, and cultural value.
- Embedding social impact assessment tools within funding and evaluation frameworks.
- Encouraging funders to recognise inclusion, experimentation, and the capacity to foster trust as essential components of innovation.
- Supporting communities and institutions in defining success criteria together.
- Investing in shared evaluation practices that promote learning and adaptability.

The future of cultural heritage institutions depends on their ability to reposition themselves within broader innovation ecosystems, not as marginal actors, but as nodes of civic value, imagination, and social change. Seizing these opportunities requires policy alignment, institutional transformation, and new forms of cross-sectoral collaboration. Moving forward, heritage must be recognised not only for what it preserves but for what it enables: more inclusive futures, regenerative systems, and democratic innovation grounded in cultural memory and community agency.

Policy challenges

The integration of cultural heritage institutions (CHIs) into innovation ecosystems presents both an opportunity and a challenge for European policy. On one hand, CHIs offer invaluable public infrastructure, long-term knowledge, and trusted civic legitimacy. They play a growing role in addressing social and environmental challenges through participatory and place-based innovation. On the other hand, innovation frameworks, funding instruments, and evaluation metrics remain largely misaligned with the realities of how CHIs operate, limiting their capacity to contribute fully. While strategic frameworks used within EU initiatives such as the New European Bauhaus and the EIT Culture & Creativity KIC have begun to highlight the transformative potential of culture in innovation, tensions persist between formal policy mechanisms and the embedded, relational, and often slow practices that define heritage-based innovation. These tensions must be addressed for cultural heritage to play a systemic role in building open and inclusive innovation ecosystems.

1. Misalignment between innovation policy frameworks and CHI practices

One of the core challenges is the structural disconnect between mainstream innovation policy and the everyday practices of cultural heritage institutions. Many innovation frameworks emphasize

[2] https://ekipengine.eu/innovation-portfolios-pave-the-way-for-collaborations-with-the-creatives/

rapid scalability, tech-based solutions, and quantifiable outputs. CHIs, by contrast, engage in iterative, place-based, and socially embedded forms of innovation that unfold over longer timeframes. This results in a fundamental mismatch. While community co-creation is part of Open Science practices, other slow, relational practices such as intergenerational storytelling or care-based design are often excluded from eligibility criteria or rendered invisible in evaluation processes. These dynamics limit the ability of CHIs to access support, recognition, or funding within innovation systems. Furthermore, the emphasis on economic value creation sidelines the civic, cultural, and democratic contributions that CHIs make through their innovation work. This misalignment raises a key question for policymakers: How can innovation frameworks evolve to embrace slower, participatory, and socially oriented forms of transformation?

2. Systemic barriers: metrics, funding models, and institutional precarity

Institutional and structural barriers remain a major constraint on CHIs' ability to engage in innovation ecosystems. Interviewees repeatedly highlighted the difficulty of accessing public funding, the mismatch between funding criteria and their work, and the lack of recognition for slow or process-based outcomes. Small and community-led CHIs face disproportionate hurdles, including bureaucratic requirements, lack of staff capacity, and overreliance on project-based funding and volunteer work. Even modest micro-funding is often out of reach. Current indicators of success like audience size or media coverage, fail to reflect the civic, social, or democratic value of heritage innovation. One interviewee noted that private funders are happy to pay for restoration plaques, but not for experimentation or inclusion work. Another pointed to the invisibility of everyday innovation because it resists the language of "transformation" or "upskilling". This raises a critical challenge: how can funding and evaluation systems be reformed to capture the value of trust-building, local collaboration, and community agency?

3. Tensions between centralisation and locally rooted ecosystem building

Cultural heritage innovation often arises in highly localised and context-sensitive ways. Community dynamics, place-based relationships, and informal networks play a central role. However, policy agendas and funding structures tend to favour centralised models, standardised practices, and easily scalable solutions. This creates a tension between the decentralised reality of innovation and the centralised logic of regulation. Interviewees called for greater recognition of the diversity and specificity of local ecosystems, as well as for more horizontal networks of exchange across Europe. While EU-level initiatives can offer visibility and support, they risk becoming disconnected from lived realities when they prioritise abstract goals or universal templates. The policy implication is supporting heritage-based innovation requires decentralised infrastructures, peer learning platforms, and policy frameworks that treat CHIs as place-based intermediaries, not peripheral implementers.

4. The need for cross-sector collaboration

Innovation in cultural heritage increasingly depends on connections that reach beyond the cultural sector. Effective initiatives often span multiple domains linking heritage to social inclusion, education, public health, territorial development, or environmental adaptation. Despite this, cultural heritage institutions (CHIs) are often treated as peripheral actors in innovation ecosystems, consulted for communication or outreach rather than recognised as strategic partners.

Many heritage-led projects operate through informal, locally grounded partnerships that respond to community needs. These collaborations between museums and social services, libraries and migrant organisations, archives and youth groups, generate public value but often fall outside the scope of traditional innovation frameworks. Policies and funding instruments tend to favour formalised consortia or tech-oriented agendas, making it harder for CHIs to initiate or sustain collaborative work with actors from other fields.

There is a structural misalignment between how innovation happens on the ground and how it is framed institutionally. Fragmented policy domains and sector-specific funding criteria discourage integrated approaches, even as societal challenges require precisely such coordination.

A more coherent policy framework would:

- Prioritise funding mechanisms that support partnerships across culture, education, social policy, and sustainability.
- Recognise CHIs as civic infrastructures capable of enabling local innovation through trust, continuity, and place-based knowledge.
- Support intermediary roles and brokering functions that translate between sectors, timelines, and institutional logics.

Problem statements

1. Rethinking innovation frameworks for cultural heritage institutions

Innovation in the cultural heritage sector is often framed through narrow lenses emphasizing novelty, scale, and digitalization, while overlooking the embedded, iterative, and relational nature of innovation as experienced by many institutions. Heritage-led innovation frequently takes the form of updating missions, reactivating social functions, or experimenting with new forms of participation. However, current policy frameworks and evaluation systems rarely reflect these slower, learning-based processes. There is a growing gap between policy expectations for innovation and the operational realities of local institutions. The emphasis on quantifiable outcomes such as audience growth or digital transition marginalizes efforts rooted in community-building, inclusion, and experimentation. Without reform, policy agendas risk creating a misalignment that discourages real innovation on the ground.

How can innovation frameworks be adapted to recognize and support the diverse, place-based and relational innovation practices of cultural heritage institutions?

2. Structural precarity as a barrier to innovation

Across the sector, many cultural heritage institutions, particularly smaller or citizen-led ones, operate in conditions of structural precarity. Limited funding, rigid public ownership structures, and bureaucratic barriers hinder their ability to sustain experimentation or develop long-term strategies. Public-private asymmetries exacerbate the problem, as some flexible private institutions can innovate more easily while others depend on complex public systems that limit agility. Precarity also affects staff, undermining career pathways and reducing diversity in professional profiles, which in turn limits institutional renewal. Reports such as *Stakeholder Analysis (ILUCIDARE project, 2019)* stress that fragmented funding and weak employment conditions are major obstacles to institutional innovation. Without changes in the regulatory and financial ecosystem, innovation will remain unsustainable and exclusionary.

How can cultural policy address institutional fragility and employment precarity to unlock innovation capacity across the sector? It's important to keep in mind what is under control for the Cultural Heritage Institutions and focus on the policy challenges in which they have influence.

3. Inadequate indicators and impact measurement

Current systems for evaluating innovation in cultural heritage often fail to capture its true value and dynamics. Metrics are typically derived from growth-based or product-oriented models, prioritizing efficiency, scale, or digital outputs. Yet many innovation practices in heritage institutions involve social processes, collective learning, or identity building outcomes that are difficult to quantify through standard indicators. This creates a mismatch between what institutions do and what is considered valuable in funding and evaluation terms. As noted in *Dynamics and future scenarios for the cultural heritage sector* (Charter Project, 2024), mainstream evaluation logics remain poorly suited to the sector's cyclical, long-term, and context-specific dynamics. Without more adequate tools to assess innovation beyond audience data or digital presence, many impactful initiatives remain invisible to funders and policymakers.

What new indicators or methodologies are needed to assess innovation in heritage in ways that reflect social value, relational dynamics, and long-term transformation?

4. Tensions between centralised agendas and local innovation ecosystems

Many heritage institutions operate within decentralised, community-based ecosystems that prioritise responsiveness, participation, and local partnerships. Yet policy and funding systems often favour centralised models that impose rigid criteria or overly bureaucratic procedures. European initiatives, while ambitious, can be resource-intensive and ill-suited to small institutions with limited administrative capacity. This creates an asymmetry that stifles bottom-up innovation and concentrates opportunity among larger players. There is a growing recognition of the need to decentralise innovation support and to foster horizontal exchange between institutions of different sizes. Experiences from rural or peripheral contexts show that local anchoring and peer learning can yield sustainable, replicable practices. However, these remain under-supported.

How can European cultural policy better support distributed innovation through more accessible, decentralised, and flexible governance models?

5. The overlooked role of heritage in social innovation

Cultural heritage plays a significant yet under acknowledged role in driving social innovation. Institutions that engage with marginalised groups, foster new forms of participation, or help build collective identity are performing critical social functions. Yet these contributions often remain invisible in dominant policy narratives, which still prioritise economic value, tourism, or technological transformation. Heritage is rarely framed as a solution space in broader social policy, despite evidence of its potential to foster cohesion, recognition, and inclusion. The *European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage* (2018) calls for more integrated approaches, but concrete mechanisms remain limited. If heritage's role in social innovation continues to be overlooked, opportunities for joined-up policy and cross-sector collaboration will be lost.

How can the cultural heritage sector be more fully integrated into social innovation policy agendas at regional, national, and European levels?

3. Policy vision

Cultural Heritage Institutions hold a largely untapped potential as strategic actors in innovation. Yet, our interviews with museum directors, librarians, archivists, and heritage managers reveal a widespread hesitation to identify their work as innovative. Most heritage practitioners do not see themselves as contributors to innovation agendas… until the conversation shifts. When the notion of open, social, and civic innovation is introduced, their narratives transform. They begin to describe how they co-create with communities, build new social relations, prototype ideas, and contribute to systemic change, most likely without naming it as such.

This disconnect signals a deeper issue. There is a gap between how innovation is practiced on the ground and how it is recognised at the policy level. At the same time, interviews with innovation experts and consultants confirm that heritage can and should play a central role in broader innovation ecosystems. Hence pointing that a shift in policy frameworks is needed. One that expands the definition of innovation to include social, cultural, and care-based practices, and positions CHIs as vital contributors to just and sustainable futures.

This vision builds on the spirit of the 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage and its slogan, "**Our heritage: where the past meets the future,**" by affirming the role of CHIs as drivers of inclusive, forward-looking transformation.

This vision does not underestimate the structural precarity of the sector nor the chronic challenges faced by small and large institutions alike, whether public or private, for-profit or not-for-profit. It acknowledges the fragile conditions under which many CHIs operate. Yet, it argues that these challenges must be addressed not with marginal fixes but through stronger frameworks, better tools, and more adaptive funding opportunities. We position this vision not in denial of those limitations, but as a way to confront and overcome them by affirming the strategic role of CHIs in shaping more inclusive, resilient, and innovative societies. This requires moving beyond the oft-repeated refrain heard throughout the interviews "*we innovate to survive*" toward a paradigm where CHIs are empowered to innovate by design, not by necessity.

Objectives

Drawing from literature and interviews conducted for this scoping note, the following objectives define a renewed policy vision for cultural heritage institutions (CHIs) within open innovation ecosystems:

- The value and opportunities that CHIs contribute to innovation through cultural, social, and civic means are recognised across innovation, cultural, and broader public policy frameworks.

- Data on the activities, roles, and impacts of CHIs are systematically collected and made actionable to support strategic planning, funding decisions, and policy development especially in cross-sectoral contexts such as education, climate, digitalisation, and territorial development.

- Innovation objectives for CHIs go beyond narrow digitalisation efforts, embracing a more ambitious and systemic approach that includes social repair, community empowerment, and institutional transformation.

- Structural barriers that limit CHIs from actively participating in innovation ecosystems such as underfunding, siloed governance, and risk-averse evaluation systems are identified and addressed through dedicated instruments, funding streams, and capacity-building efforts.

Stakeholder needs

The interviews conducted revealed a series of recurring needs, tensions and aspirations shared by professionals across the cultural heritage sector. Despite operating in highly diverse contexts, from large private foundations to rural community museums, participants voiced common concerns about the conditions in which innovation becomes possible, recognised, and sustainable. These needs are not abstract policy recommendations, but grounded reflections that emerge directly from lived experience. Each one is supported by a direct quote from the interviews and organised into three broad categories:

1. Institutional conditions
2. Social and cultural dimensions
3. Evaluation and recognition mechanisms

Institutional conditions for innovation

Recognise failure as part of the process

> "*Innovation is an error-based process. We must allow institutions to fail. How do you want to innovate if you are not allowed to fail? How do we translate this into policy?*"
> *- Innovation expert*

Adapt legal and operational frameworks to institutionalise complexity

> "*We have three different founders in our museum: local administration, cultural ministry and city art centers. Each of them wants different things from us... Heritage institutions tend to be like this. Very multifaceted. We are an ecosystem by ourselves. Our business model is quite complex, from renting spaces to participating in European projects to research and innovation, etc.*"
> *- Research manager at a museum*

Provide accessible and small-scale funding for decentralised initiatives

> "Too many barriers to receive European funding… We must facilitate the life of small entities. Even if they are small. Micro-fundings… 5000-10000 euros can make a big difference and spark innovation processes."
> *—Heritage network manager*

Improve working conditions and career paths for heritage professionals

"If you want to innovate in Cultural Heritage Institutions you need new people coming in… but as long as the work conditions keep being precarious… you will have the same professional profile as ever… Limited career prospects hinder innovation."
— EU project coordinator

Recognise that innovation depends on prepared ecosystems, not isolated efforts

"Innovation cannot happen by itself. It needs a lot of previous work… There must be an ecosystem already in place… If you are not ready, you will not be able to catch opportunities."
— Heritage expert

Cultural and social dimensions of innovation

Embrace innovation as a process of care, continuity and institutional learning

"Innovation for libraries is not about finding new activities, new business models or new functionalities… It's about updating activities, business models and functionalities."
— Innovation expert

Involve marginalised communities as drivers of institutional innovation

"If you want to innovate in a museum, library, archives, etc., bring marginalised people into the institution and you will have innovation. Bring migrant people, homeless people, sex workers, etc… Then you will have innovation. Innovation is outside the institution."
— Heritage and social innovation expert

Acknowledge the reality of fragmented, project-based collaboration ecosystems

"We are more comfortable working in a project-based relation than with long-term partnerships. Our ecosystem is based in project-based collaborations. We feel that we maximise more our efforts"
— Museum Manager

Evaluation and recognition mechanisms

Develop indicators that reflect social impact and organisational transformation

"Innovation impact in heritage is always reduced to audience enlargement and diversification because it's the easiest indicator. We need to go beyond this."
— Museum manager

Support CHIs as connectors and ecosystem builders

"Most important is to have communication spaces between local heritage institutions, local population and local finance opportunities."
—Heritage network manager

There are other EU-funded projects that have identified stakeholder needs at the intersection of cultural heritage and innovation. Given the scale and scope of these initiatives, their findings tend to focus on more structural and high-level needs across sectors. If you wish to explore these perspectives further, the ILUCIDARE and CHARTER projects offer particularly insightful frameworks and analyses.

4. Policy landscape & trend analysis

Policy context

It cannot be understated how cultural heritage has gained unprecedented visibility and recognition across European and international policy frameworks, primarily as a matter of conservation, and to a much lesser extent as a driver of research and innovation (R&I), sustainability, and democratic participation. This uneven but growing relevance coincides with a critical period in which the notion of cultural heritage is expanding, interdisciplinary research is intensifying, and there is increased public engagement with diverse and sometimes contested heritage narratives.

Foundational frameworks such as the Faro Convention (Council of Europe, 2005) laid the groundwork by placing communities and shared responsibility at the centre of heritage policies. This vision was much later reaffirmed with the Council of Europe Ministerial Conference on Culture (2022), which highlighted creativity and cultural heritage as essential assets for a diverse and democratic Europe.

At the EU level, cultural heritage has steadily gained recognition as a cross-cutting issue. The Council Conclusions of May 2014 and June 2018 positioned it as a strategic resource for sustainable development and called for its integration into multiple policy domains. The European Year of Cultural Heritage (EYCH) 2018 marked a turning point: it demonstrated broad public support for heritage, expanded the concept of heritage itself, and promoted the potential of research, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, to contribute to democratic and inclusive futures.

The European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage (2019), and in particular its Pillar 4 *"Heritage for an Innovative Europe"*, captured this ambition by linking heritage with creativity, open innovation, and social change. However, major gaps remain between high-level recognition and operational implementation. The Work Plan for Culture 2019–2022, for example, narrowly paired innovation with financing under the same topic, reinforcing a primarily economic interpretation. In the current 2023–2026 Work Plan, heritage is largely addressed from a risk and preservation perspective, important, yet insufficient to unlock its transformative potential.

Despite €500 million invested in heritage R&I under Horizon 2020 and continued support through Horizon Europe Cluster 2, institutional and thematic fragmentation still hampers the field. Stakeholders often struggle to translate strategic frameworks into coherent and long-term approaches. The Policy Review on Innovation and Cultural Heritage stressed the need for a holistic and interdisciplinary research agenda, capable of overcoming silos and enabling the cultural heritage sector to fully contribute to Europe's social, ecological, and economic transitions.

In this light, the development of the ARCHE Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA) is a timely step forward. Building on the legacy of the JPI Cultural Heritage SRIA 2020, the new ARCHE SRIA is being co-designed through a participatory process involving researchers, practitioners, civil society, and policymakers. It aims to become the masterplan for heritage-related research and innovation in Europe, addressing both conceptual fragmentation and operational challenges.

At the urban scale, it is promising to see heritage included in wider policy domains. The Urban Agenda for the EU and its Culture Action Plan (2020) are experimenting with collaborative governance, heritage-led regeneration, and cultural hubs as engines of innovation. Flagship initiatives such as the New European Bauhaus, the European Collaborative Cloud for Cultural Heritage (ECCCH), and the EIT Culture & Creativity KIC further demonstrate the EU's growing commitment to heritage-led innovation.

Yet, despite these advances, heritage investments remain undervalued, both by policymakers and within the sector itself. The challenge is not just to increase funding, but to enhance awareness, capacity, and policy coherence. On the other hand, chronic precarity continues to affect cultural heritage institutions of all shape, form and types. As reflected in stakeholder interviews, structural barriers including institutional rigidity and funding limitations remain strong across the sector.

This Policy Lab seeks to contribute to a shift in this paradigm by affirming that innovation in heritage must go beyond digitisation, embracing a systemic and relational approach. Cultural heritage institutions (CHIs) should be empowered as active agents of transformation, capable of designing inclusive, sustainable, and democratic futures across Europe.

EU legislative and regulatory measures

At the time of writing this scoping document, the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028–2035 has not yet been finalised. This makes it a pivotal moment to observe how the European Union will prioritise its financial and strategic efforts for the coming decade, particularly in relation to culture, heritage, and innovation.

While cultural heritage is not yet a formal pillar of EU legislation, policy trends over the past decade reveal a growing ambition to integrate cultural heritage institutions (CHIs) into broader open innovation ecosystems. From participatory governance and digital transformation to sustainability and cross-sectoral collaboration, recent initiatives and regulatory developments increasingly treat CHIs not only as custodians of the past but as active contributors to innovation, social cohesion and ecological transition. The analysis below outlines how this shift is unfolding within EU legislative and programmatic frameworks and what gaps remain.

1. From preservation to participation

Early heritage frameworks, such as the Council of Europe conventions and the principles of the Faro Convention, focused predominantly on safeguarding and preservation. While not binding EU law, these texts significantly influenced funding programmes like Creative Europe and Horizon 2020. Since 2018, particularly with the European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage and the European Agenda for Culture, there has been a shift towards participatory governance and citizen engagement, aligning cultural heritage more closely with democratic innovation and place-based policy.

The European Commission's proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034) marks a turning point. Creative Europe is set to merge into a broader AgoraEU programme, alongside the former CERV programme, under a new structure featuring three strands: Culture, MEDIA+, and Democracy. Importantly, the Creative Europe – Culture strand will retain its autonomy

and core funding mechanisms, including support for transnational cooperation, cultural mobility, and heritage-focused initiatives such as the European Capitals of Culture and the European Heritage Label.

Culture Action Europe has welcomed this development, especially the proposed doubling of the overall culture and media budget to €4.99 billion and the increased visibility of the Creative Europe – Culture strand.[3] However, the organisation stresses that this funding represents . They urge the European Parliament and the Council of the EU to strengthen this budget further during negotiations.

At the same time, the merger into AgoraEU raises concerns about the potential dilution of the EU's only programme specifically dedicated to culture and heritage. While heritage remains explicitly supported, the expanded political scope of AgoraEU, closely aligned with the EU's democratic resilience agenda, risks instrumentalising cultural funding for broader political objectives, such as countering disinformation. This shift is compounded by the increasing emphasis on market-driven metrics such as scalability, efficiency, and competitiveness, which may not align with the slow, socially embedded value creation processes typical of heritage institutions.

Culture undeniably contributes to democracy and societal resilience. Yet, precisely because of this, it must retain a dedicated and protected budget line. Advancing the democratic responsibility of the heritage sector should never come at the expense of its cultural, historical, and artistic value. Preserving the autonomy and integrity of the Creative Europe – Culture strand within AgoraEU is essential to support the long-term potential of heritage institutions and safeguard cultural diversity in the EU's evolving policy framework.

2. Digitalisation and data regulation

Legislative instruments such as the Open Data Directive and the Digital Europe Programme are increasingly shaping the operational landscape for Cultural Heritage Institutions, particularly in their roles as data holders, content providers, and platforms for digital engagement. While these regulations are not heritage-specific, they significantly influence the digital innovation capacities of CHIs and determine how they [4] in broader data-driven ecosystems. The development of the European Data Space for Cultural Heritage, as part of the EU data strategy, represents a key intersection between regulatory frameworks and digital infrastructure policies.

However, there is a growing risk that digitalisation becomes overly dominant in EU innovation thinking around cultural heritage. The ambitious rollout of the European Collaborative Cloud for Cultural Heritage (ECCCH) exemplifies this trend where digital transformation is positioned as the primary vector of innovation. While important, this narrow focus may crowd out other forms of heritage-based innovation, such as those rooted in participation, social value, or place-based knowledge. A more balanced approach is needed to ensure digital tools serve rather than define the future of cultural heritage innovation.

[3] See full CAE analysis here; https://cultureactioneurope.org/news/proposed-e8-6-billion-for-culture-and-democracy-in-the-next-eu-budget/

[4] https://www.dataspace-culturalheritage.eu/en

3. Innovation through market logics

With competitiveness and economic security now at the core of the EU's strategic agenda as emphasised in the Draghi[5] and Letta[6] reports, there is growing concern that market-oriented innovation may become the dominant framework shaping European funding instruments and programmes. The current European Commission has positioned competition as a strategic pillar, and across the EU policy space, terms such as *competitiveness*, *scale-up*, and *market uptake* increasingly define how innovation is framed and supported. While this direction may benefit technology and industrial sectors, it risks marginalising forms of innovation that are non-commercial, community-based, or focused on public value, particularly in fields such as cultural heritage.

A telling example is the EIT Culture & Creativity Knowledge and Innovation Community (KIC), launched in 2022 as the EU's flagship initiative to support innovation ecosystems in the cultural and creative sectors. Backed by long-term investment from the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT), the KIC prioritises entrepreneurial capacity, start-up creation, and market-driven innovation. The initiative places strong emphasis on business models, product development, and scalability. However, cultural heritage institutions were notably absent from the original consortium, only finding one organisation out of 50 partners that has heritage as its core activity[7].

It is important to clarify that cultural heritage is officially recognised as a focus area of the KIC, and it is identified as a key priority in the EIT's 2025 Innovation Call[8]. The sector is by no means excluded from collaboration opportunities. However, the framing, language, and operational culture of the KIC rooted in start-up ecosystems and innovation acceleration, may not align easily with the practices, rhythms, and values of the cultural heritage field. Many heritage institutions operate under different logics. As we have argued throughout this scoping note, they are oriented toward long-term stewardship, social cohesion, participatory governance, and place-based development. These forms of value creation, while essential to resilient innovation ecosystems, are often difficult to capture through commercial KPIs or scalability metrics.

4. Sustainability and the Green Transition

Environmental legislation rarely makes explicit reference to cultural heritage institutions (CHIs), yet frameworks like the European Green Deal, the EU Taxonomy Regulation, and the EU Adaptation Strategy[9] increasingly shape the direction of innovation funding. These instruments promote cross-sectoral collaboration and expect cultural actors to contribute to climate objectives. In this context,

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5 The Future of European Competitiveness, https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report_en#paragraph_47059

6 Enrico Letta, Much More than a Market, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/ny3j24sm/much-more-than-a-market-report-by-enrico-letta.pdf

7 See the 50 members from the original consortium here: https://www.eit.europa.eu/sites/default/files/winning_consortium_factsheet.pdf

8 See more here: https://eit-culture-creativity.eu/innovation-call-2025/

9 EU Adaptation Strategy - European Commission

the New European Bauhaus (NEB) has emerged as a flagship initiative that places culture at the heart of the green transition.

The NEB connects the Green Deal to citizens' daily lives by integrating sustainability, inclusion, and aesthetics. While it is not heritage-specific, it explicitly recognises cultural heritage and the broader cultural and creative sectors (CCS) as key enablers of systemic transformation. By mobilising a wide range of EU research and innovation tools, NEB encourages collaboration between municipalities, cultural institutions, creative professionals, and communities. It reframes sustainability through cultural values, participatory processes, and design-led experimentation.

Insights from the NEB Policy Lab (as discussed in this scoping document) confirmed that NEB has successfully catalysed the involvement of CCS actors in climate and spatial justice agendas. At the same time, participants identified persisting challenges such as fragmented support mechanisms and limited access for smaller institutions. The *ekip* team built on these reflections to propose policy recommendations that further embed CCS actors within open innovation ecosystems. Projects like PITCH show early signs of how CHIs can align with green policies, but NEB remains the most structured EU initiative to advance a cultural and participatory vision of the green transition.

5. Fragmented but converging?

Despite growing policy attention, EU legislation still lacks a coherent regulatory framework that embeds cultural heritage institutions (CHIs) as central players in open innovation ecosystems. Responsibilities for culture, research and innovation, environment, and digital transformation remain largely siloed across different Directorates-General (DG EAC, DG RTD, DG ENV, DG CNECT), limiting coordinated action. However, recent strategic documents and programming efforts suggest an emerging convergence. A shift is underway from sector-specific interventions to more integrated, transdisciplinary models where cultural heritage, innovation, and societal transformation are increasingly interlinked.

The ARCHE (Alliance for Research on Cultural Heritage in Europe) initiative is a key attempt to establish a coordinated European approach to heritage research. Its forthcoming Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA), expected by late 2025, aims to guide future investment under Horizon Europe and beyond. The draft version (mid-2025) marks a conceptual step forward: it explicitly embraces open innovation, cross-sectoral collaboration, and inter- and transdisciplinary research as foundational principles.[10] The SRIA advocates a model of heritage research that spans academic, public, private, and civic actors, calling for greater community participation and engagement with complex societal challenges. Its three proposed priority areas—Cultural Heritage and Environment, Cultural Heritage and Society, and Cultural Heritage and Governance—reflect a broad understanding of heritage as a dynamic field connected to resilience, sustainability, identity, and belonging.

Yet, the draft SRIA stops short of recognising civic, social, or open innovation as distinct research areas in their own right. Instead, these values are implicitly embedded within the broader calls for

10 https://eufore.eu/sria-draft/

systemic thinking and inclusivity. This is a missed opportunity to strengthen the visibility and strategic relevance of CHIs within the wider innovation agenda.

Nonetheless, the SRIA's direction aligns well with the *ekip* vision: it frames heritage as a living, evolving system rather than a static asset, and it calls for participatory, collaborative approaches that can re-position heritage institutions as vital nodes in Europe's innovation landscape. The challenge now is to ensure that this strategic intent translates into concrete regulatory support and dedicated funding streams in the next Multiannual Financial Framework.

Conclusion: Towards a coherent EU Framework for Heritage and Innovation

The evolving EU policy landscape reveals a growing recognition of cultural heritage institutions (CHIs) as relevant actors for innovation, sustainability, and democratic renewal. From digital regulation to green transition initiatives, and from market-oriented instruments to emerging transdisciplinary strategies like the SRIA, the direction is quite clear. CHIs can no longer stay peripheral to innovation. They must become essential nodes within its ecosystem.

However, this integration remains partial and uneven. Legislative silos, the dominance of digital and market logics, and the uncertain future of key programmes like *Creative Europe* all pose risks to the effective inclusion of heritage institutions in EU innovation agendas. As the EU prepares its next Multiannual Financial Framework, it is crucial that cultural heritage is not absorbed into broader value-based agendas without maintaining its specific identity, needs, and potential.

A more coherent policy framework would:

- Prioritise funding mechanisms that support partnerships across culture, education, social policy, and sustainability.
- Recognise CHIs as civic infrastructures capable of enabling local innovation through trust, continuity, and place-based knowledge.
- Support intermediary roles and brokering functions that translate between sectors, timelines, and institutional logics.

To build resilient, participatory, and future-oriented innovation ecosystems, Europe must ensure that CHIs are not only invited to the table but empowered as core partners, supported by coherent regulation, targeted investment, and recognition of their unique modes of value creation.

Overview of current policy measures & R&I portfolio

EU Research & Innovation (R&I) portfolio

European research programmes have played a decisive role in repositioning cultural heritage as a vector for innovation, sustainability, and societal transformation. Through Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe, the EU has not only scaled up investment in heritage-related R&I but has also begun to cultivate an open innovation ecosystem where cultural heritage institutions are increasingly recognised as key actors. These programmes have supported collaborative, cross-sectoral approaches that go beyond preservation, exploring how heritage can generate social, economic, and ecological value.

Horizon 2020, in particular, marked a shift towards this broader framing and introducing new concepts such as the quintuple helix model for innovation (ILUCIDARE project). Although it is still too early to fully measure the long-term impact of these programmes on the heritage sector, their influence is already visible in the emergence of experimental projects, interdisciplinary networks, and participatory models of governance. Horizon Europe builds on this momentum with an even stronger emphasis on sustainability, inclusion, and digital transformation, setting the stage for cultural heritage to shape future-oriented, democratic innovation across Europe.

Horizon 2020 (2014-2020)

Horizon 2020 marked a turning point for cultural heritage within the EU's research and innovation agenda. With over €500 million allocated to heritage-related projects throughout its duration, it significantly expanded both the volume of funding and the number of topics covered. However, despite this increase, the programme often reproduced earlier thematic and disciplinary divisions—separating tangible, intangible, digital, and natural heritage rather than embracing the integrated and dynamic nature of cultural heritage as conceptualised in recent policy frameworks.

The programme's Societal Challenge 6 (SC6) introduced a wide array of heritage-relevant calls between 2017 and 2020. These included themes related to cultural tourism, creative industries, cultural policy, endangered heritage, and the role of collaborative approaches in fostering social cohesion. Digital heritage also featured prominently. Yet, the fragmentation across research pillars and the lack of a coherent heritage research agenda limited the full exploitation of this investment. The need for a holistic, interdisciplinary, and impact-oriented research framework aligned with societal, cultural, and ecological challenges—emerged as a key lesson from this phase.

ILUCIDARE: Connecting Heritage, Innovation and Diplomacy

A flagship project in this space was ILUCIDARE, the first major initiative to apply the quintuple helix model to cultural heritage-led innovation. Bringing together academia, public institutions, businesses, civil society, and environmental actors, ILUCIDARE redefined heritage as a strategic driver of innovation and international cooperation. Its outputs—such as the ILUCIDARE Innovation Handbook, training modules, stakeholder analysis and Special Prizes—established practical frameworks and international networks that continue to inspire heritage-based innovation and diplomacy.

CultureLabs: Recipes for Social Innovation

CultureLabs tackled the challenge of activating cultural heritage as a tool for social inclusion. The project co-designed participatory methodologies referred to as "recipes" to empower marginalised communities, particularly immigrants and refugees, in collaboration with museums, civil society organisations, and policy stakeholders. By treating culture as a shared resource and experimenting with new forms of engagement, CultureLabs offered replicable models for inclusive cultural programming.

ROCK: Regeneration Through Cultural Heritage

Focusing on urban environments, the ROCK project developed a collaborative and circular systemic approach to the adaptive reuse and regeneration of historic city centres. ROCK linked cities, universities, and cultural institutions through living labs, digital platforms, and knowledge exchange mechanisms. Its emphasis on environmental sustainability, public participation, and cultural heritage as a resource for city branding positioned it as a model for innovation-led urban transformation.

ARCHES: Accessible Cultural Heritage for All

Inclusion was also at the heart of the ARCHES project, which aimed to make cultural heritage accessible to people with cognitive, sensory, and communication difficulties. Through participatory design and the application of emerging technologies such as augmented reality, avatars, and tactile guides ARCHES demonstrated how museums and cultural institutions can reimagine engagement and learning experiences for a wider audience.

eHERITAGE: Advancing Virtual Heritage Research

Finally, the eHERITAGE project worked to enhance European research capacity in virtual reality applications for cultural heritage. By connecting leading institutions across Romania, Italy, and Slovenia, it built a centre of excellence in virtual heritage and explored innovative ways to digitally preserve, interpret, and disseminate Europe's cultural assets. The project laid important groundwork for the development of immersive, user-centred approaches to cultural heritage interpretation.

Together, these projects reflect the growing recognition of heritage as a field of innovation, social, technological, and institutional. They illustrate a sector in transformation, engaging with digital technologies, participatory governance, and sustainability. At the same time, they underline the need for more integrated, long-term, and interdisciplinary approaches, something Horizon Europe is now beginning to address more coherently.

Horizon Europe (2021-2027)

Cultural heritage is recognised as one of the three core areas of intervention in the programme's Cluster 2: Culture, Creativity, and Inclusive Society), which supports research and innovation (R&I) addressing culture, creativity, and inclusive societies. The programme frames cultural heritage not only as an asset for digitisation and preservation, but as a driver of sustainable innovation, societal cohesion, and European identity. Among the expected impacts are the enhancement of cultural

governance, wider access to heritage, and the positioning of Europe as a leader in conservation technologies and creative industries. However, despite this ambitious framing, there is no planned European Partnership to institutionalise this impact, limiting long-term coordination and support.

The programme's language often emphasises digitisation, tourism, and economic competitiveness, while more systemic and social dimensions of heritage innovation remain less developed. Nevertheless, several funded projects under Cluster 2 point to a growing interest in place-based, participatory and cross-sectoral approaches that align with the broader vision of heritage as a vector for relational and democratic innovation.

Participatory Management and Sustainable Governance in Cultural Institutions

One of the most conceptually promising calls of the first Horizon Europe Work Programme (2021–2022) was HORIZON-CL2-2021-HERITAGE-01-02, which focused on exploring new participatory and financially sustainable models for cultural institutions, particularly museums, libraries, and archives. Projects funded under this call are pioneering commons-oriented, value co-creation, and living lab approaches, critical to reframing innovation in heritage as a social and democratic process, not merely a technological one.

GLAMMONS – Cultural Commons and Participatory GLAMs

The GLAMMONS project reimagines Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (GLAMs) as commons-oriented institutions grounded in co-creation, openness and accessibility. It examines community-led initiatives—neighbourhood archives, local museums, oral histories—that are emerging across Europe and envisions them as engines of social cohesion and justice. The project fosters digital and social innovation by developing toolkits, MOOCs, podcasts, and open training resources for professionals and communities alike. Its approach represents a bottom-up alternative to traditional institutional models, rooted in care, participation and inclusion.

LibrarIN – Co-Creation and Social Innovation in Libraries

LibrarIN explores the transformative potential of co-creation and social innovation within public libraries by designing and testing new models of service delivery where individual and societal values are co-constructed. The project develops a comprehensive theoretical framework for value co-creation, tracks innovation through an online benchmarking tool, and informs library policy with empirical evidence and scalable solutions. By embedding innovation in the everyday practices of libraries, LibrarIN advances a civic-centred vision of these institutions as democratic and dynamic social infrastructures.

RECHARGE – Living Labs for Participatory Business Model

RECHARGE (Resilient European Cultural Heritage As Resource for Growth and Engagement) supports participatory business models for cultural institutions, linking community participation to financial sustainability. Through a network of Cultural Heritage Living Labs, the project co-designs strategies for resource diversification, public engagement, and sustainable development. It explicitly connects economic resilience with openness and inclusion, positioning community engagement not only as a social value but also as a key resource for institutional viability in both digital and onsite environments.Key Insights

IN SITU – Place-Based Innovation in Non-Urban Areas

Under the call HORIZON-CL2-2021-HERITAGE-01-03, the IN SITU project explores how cultural and creative industries (CCIs) can act as drivers of innovation in non-urban and peripheral regions.

It combines research with experimental actions to map and foster the socio-economic contributions of CCIs and their capacity to generate cross-sectoral spill-overs. Its work on policy alignment, innovation mentoring, and local project incubation exemplifies the kind of ecosystemic logic often missing from heritage innovation agendas. IN SITU demonstrates that heritage-led innovation must be understood through *place-specific logics* and *distributed capacities*, rather than centralised technological interventions alone.

EPIC-WE and LoGaCulture – Games, Youth and Cultural Participation

The call HORIZON-CL2-2022-HERITAGE-01-09 foregrounds the intersection between games and cultural heritage. The EPIC-WE project harnesses game-making as a tool for civic engagement, empowering young people to co-create digital experiences rooted in European cultural values. The initiative connects cultural institutions, higher education, creative sectors, and young citizens through collaborative "cultural game jams", positioning game design as a medium for participatory heritage creation.

In parallel, LoGaCulture investigates locative games—digital experiences triggered by physical locations—to deepen engagement with heritage sites. While technically focused, the project also critiques the fragmentation and experimental fragility of this subfield, calling for sustainable deployment models that can be embedded within institutional structures and supported by existing staff.

RACNE – Reweaving the European Silk Innovation Ecosystem

ARACNE revives Europe's silk heritage not only as a cultural legacy but as a vehicle for innovation and regional development. The project proposes a European Silk Route, linking local production hubs across the continent into a multi-level, bottom-up innovation ecosystem. Bringing together academia, industry, civil society and public actors, ARACNE uses cultural heritage to drive new economic models, creative production, and sustainability. It exemplifies the potential of material heritage to act as a connector between tradition and forward-looking innovation strategies.

CULTURATI – Customised Games and Routes for Cultural Heritage and Arts

CULTURATI proposes a global content platform that engages users with cultural heritage through interactive games and smart visitor routing. Combining human-centred design and technologies such as AI, IoT, and cloud computing, the project addresses overcrowding, accessibility, and audience engagement. With five pilot sites, CULTURATI reflects a new generation of digital cultural services—aiming to balance preservation with experience, and local identity with global access. While heavily tech-driven, its collaborative approach between CCIs, cultural institutions, and the public hints at a more integrated cultural-educational ecosystem.

Work programme (2023-2025)

The 2023–2025 work programme introduces a more critical and reflective perspective on innovation and digitisation in heritage. The call *HORIZON-CL2-2023-HERITAGE-01-03: Re-visiting the digitisation of cultural heritage: What, how and why?* signals a conceptual shift, reassessing not just the technological affordances of digitisation, but really focusing on its societal, legal, ethical, and inclusivity dimensions.

DIGICHer – Digitisation of Cultural Heritage of Minority Communities

DIGICHer focuses on equity and inclusiveness in digitising the cultural heritage of minority communities (the Sámi, Jewish and Ladin peoples, among others). It challenges mainstream digitisation practices by foregrounding user-centric design, ethical governance, and culturally respectful reuse of digital assets. The project proposes a validated, scalable framework that supports democratic cultural participation, aiming to reduce risks of digital misuse and promote long-term stewardship that reflects plural European worldviews.

IMPULSE – Immersive Digitisation for Cultural Revival

IMPULSE aims to upcycle cultural heritage through immersive technologies, fostering XR-based storytelling, audience engagement, and capacity-building for creative sectors. It also tackles legal and ethical barriers to immersive reuse of cultural content, highlighting the need for new frameworks around intellectual property, interoperability, and social inclusion. The project brings together artists, institutions, researchers, and creative industries to co-create strategies for sustainable use of digital heritage in immersive and metaverse environments.

REEVALUATE – Towards Collaborative and Democratic Digitisation

REEVALUATE adopts a systemic approach to the entire cultural heritage digitisation lifecycle, integrating human-centred design, AI tools, and citizen engagement. The project develops a modular framework to manage the process from asset selection to creative reuse, grounded in the actual needs of stakeholders. Among its key contributions are participatory contextualisation that centres marginalised voices, AI-based tools to facilitate the reuse of heritage assets and connect them with creative actors, and governance protocols for digital rights management using NFT and distributed ledger technologies. By advancing creative reuse, accessibility, and civic co-ownership, REEVALUATE repositions digitisation as a means of generating societal value rather than merely a technical exercise.

The PITCH Project. Heritage and green transition

The PITCH project explores how cultural heritage can support ecological and energy transitions. It examines Europe's petrocultural legacies—visible in museums, industrial sites, and energy landscapes and reinterprets them to foster citizen trust in green futures. Through participatory approaches, PITCH offers tools for policymakers and practitioners to rethink heritage in light of climate challenges. By making fossil-fuel heritage legible and usable, the project promotes a systemic view of innovation where cultural heritage is not only preserved but mobilised as a driver of just and sustainable transformation.

The Cultural Heritage Cloud or "European Collaborative Cloud for Cultural Heritage" (ECCCH)

The European Collaborative Cloud for Cultural Heritage (ECCCH) is an EU-driven initiative designed to create a shared digital environment that connects cultural heritage institutions and professionals across Europe. Its aim is to improve access to advanced digital tools, harmonised metadata standards and efficient workflows for digitising, preserving and sharing cultural heritage collections. The origins of the ECCCH lie in the European Commission's commitment to strengthen cooperation, digital capacity and data interoperability within the cultural heritage sector, responding to long-standing fragmentation and unequal access to digital infrastructures. The

ECCCH is closely linked to the Common European Data Space for Cultural Heritage (CEDS-CH), one of the EU's domain-specific data spaces that supports cross-border data sharing, reuse and innovation, particularly around high-quality digital cultural heritage resources such as 3D models, digitised artefacts and research metadata. Together, the ECCCH and the CEDS-CH create a more connected, interoperable and digitally empowered cultural heritage ecosystem across the European Union.

Complementary EU programmes

Creative Europe

Creative Europe supports a wide range of networks essential for strengthening cross-sectoral collaboration among heritage institutions. Networks such as Europa Nostra, Culture Action Europe (CAE), the European Route of Industrial Heritage (ERIH), the Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO), and Future for Religious Heritage (FRH) serve as critical actors in Europe's cultural and creative ecosystems. These networks not only facilitate peer learning and channel funding opportunities but also help build shared standards, capacities, and narratives across the sector. By promoting a shared language for innovation and sustainability, they strengthen institutional cooperation and visibility. However, their concentration in English and centralised structures can sometimes limit accessibility for smaller or more locally embedded institutions.

Erasmus +

Erasmus+ contributes significantly to the heritage sector by fostering mobility, peer-to-peer learning, and the exchange of knowledge across European institutions. It supports cultural professionals, students, and educators in developing the skills and partnerships needed to engage with broader innovation processes. For heritage institutions, Erasmus+ offers powerful tools to strengthen international collaboration, test participatory models, and support long-term institutional development through shared learning. Programmes like the Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters further enhance this impact by promoting interdisciplinary curricula that bridge heritage, sustainability, innovation, and cultural management, cultivating a new generation of professionals equipped to work across sectors and borders.

Interreg

The Interreg programme funds numerous cross-border projects where cultural heritage serves as a bridge for cooperation, regional cohesion, and local development. These initiatives often involve transnational partnerships between municipalities, museums, civil society organisations, and cultural sites, promoting territorial innovation through cultural heritage. Interreg's emphasis on regional collaboration aligns closely with the open innovation ethos by encouraging place-based, participatory approaches and strengthening local ownership of heritage-led regeneration and sustainability efforts.

Example: HeriTION – Participatory Heritage Management in Protected Areas

HeriTION, an Interreg project, promotes inclusive and sustainable management of cultural heritage in natural protected areas. Building on previous initiatives like Innocastle and Share, it fosters collaboration between public and private actors and actively involves local communities. The

project links cultural and natural assets with tourism strategies and supports policy improvement in key areas such as digitisation, participation, innovative financing, and accessibility. HeriTION offers a holistic model to balance heritage use and conservation, strengthening innovation, resilience and community ownership.

Future trends

Insights from social listening carried out by *ekip* partner Nextatlas reveal emerging trends that are reshaping the role of cultural heritage institutions (CHIs) in open innovation ecosystems. These developments point toward a more participatory, responsive, and socially embedded model of innovation, grounded in local contexts and collective values.

1. Cultural heritage as a platform for local resilience
CHIs are evolving from static repositories into dynamic, community-embedded infrastructures for learning, dialogue, and social innovation. By combining physical spaces with skill-sharing and knowledge exchange, they are becoming vital hubs for collective problem-solving. This shift is particularly active in Central and Eastern Europe, where institutions are reimagining their roles in response to climate change, social fragmentation, and democratic challenges.

2. Participatory and open-ended curation models
Through digital platforms, CHIs are enabling individuals and communities to reinterpret collections and contribute to meaning-making processes. This participatory turn challenges expert-driven narratives and repositions collections as open, evolving ecosystems. In doing so, institutions are not just digitizing heritage but creating new spaces for public agency and intercultural dialogue—particularly around marginalized histories.

3. New imaginaries: design fiction and speculative futures
Cultural institutions are increasingly adopting speculative approaches like worldbuilding, future thinking, and design fiction to sustain long-term visions and open-ended innovation processes. Rather than merely preserving the past, CHIs are engaging with "what if" scenarios to anticipate social and environmental futures. These approaches emphasize re-engaging with existing resources to unlock new potential, often emerging organically from within the cultural field.

4. Rethinking value: the metrics dilemma
CHIs are under growing pressure to demonstrate measurable impact, but standard indicators fail to capture the relational, slow, and transformative nature of their work. Institutions are experimenting with alternative evaluation frameworks that reflect community agency, co-creation, and cultural resilience. However, tensions remain between external demands for quantifiable outputs and the sector's embedded, process-oriented practices.

5. Heritage literacy and the search for meaning
Amid societal fragmentation and digital overload, there is renewed public interest in authenticity, memory, and belonging. Folk practices, oral histories, and place-based narratives are being rediscovered as resources for sustainable design and social cohesion. This shift toward "heritage

literacy" highlights the role of CHIs in fostering deeper cultural awareness not only preserving the past but anchoring future-oriented action.

6. Cross-sector collaboration as a strategic imperative
CHIs are increasingly collaborating beyond the cultural sector, bringing long-term, place-based knowledge into policy domains such as sustainability, inclusion, and democratic renewal. Their ability to convene diverse stakeholders makes them valuable partners in systemic innovation. Yet, current policy and funding frameworks rarely treat them as strategic co-leaders, underscoring the need for structural change and recognition.

7. Skills and capacity for innovation ecosystems
The shift toward participatory and interdisciplinary work requires new skillsets and institutional cultures. Insights from the CHARTER project emphasize the mismatch between current classification systems (e.g., ISCO, NACE) and the actual diversity of heritage occupations. To fully participate in innovation ecosystems, CHIs need support for cross-cutting skills, hybrid professional profiles, and capacity-building initiatives that legitimize experimental and collaborative practices.

Together, these trends reveal that cultural heritage is not only about safeguarding the past—it is becoming a driver of inclusive, community-rooted innovation. Recognizing and supporting this potential will be critical for building more democratic and sustainable innovation ecosystems across Europe.

5. Building blocks

Throughout this scoping document, we have identified the potential of Cultural Heritage Institutions (CHIs) to act as drivers of innovation, alongside the structural barriers that currently prevent them from fully participating in open innovation ecosystems. From fragmented funding mechanisms and rigid evaluation systems to the undervaluation of social and civic innovation, the challenges are real, but so are the opportunities.

To move from diagnosis to design, it is essential to adopt a structured framework that can help identify where change is most needed, and which areas of policy, investment, and coordination hold the greatest potential for transformation. In this context, we propose the application of a **seven-part building blocks framework**, adapted to the cultural heritage sector, as a foundation for problem framing and policy co-creation.

These building blocks reflect the key dimensions of transition across innovation ecosystems and are essential to understanding the interplay between institutional practices and system-level dynamics. They offer a coherent lens through which to assess not only barriers, but also enablers of innovation in heritage-based contexts.

The seven building blocks are:

1. **Sustainable competitiveness**: enabling cross-sector collaboration, inclusive innovation cultures, and hybrid business models.

2. **Regulation and governance**: addressing institutional complexity, fostering experimentation, and enabling adaptive governance frameworks.

3. **Social dimension**: supporting human-centred innovation, ethical development, and deep engagement with communities.

4. **Research, innovation, and technologies**: expanding the role of CHIs in R&I agendas, co-design processes, and interdisciplinary experimentation.

5. **Infrastructures**: ensuring access to both physical and digital tools, spaces, and services needed for innovation.

6. **Skills**: investing in diverse, future-oriented competencies for heritage professionals and organisations.

7. **Investment and funding**: improving access to innovation finance, microgrants, and procurement mechanisms tailored to cultural actors.

Each building block is elaborated in the table that follows, with reference to real examples, policy gaps, evaluation challenges, and potential levers for change. Together, they form a baseline for identifying where targeted interventions could empower CHIs not as peripheral implementers, but as central players in the design of inclusive, resilient, and future-facing innovation ecosystems.

In placing these building blocks at the conclusion of this scoping document, we emphasise that structural change will not happen through isolated pilot projects or rhetorical inclusion. It requires

a coordinated shift in how innovation is defined, enabled, and resourced across Europe. These blocks provide the foundation for that shift.

Building Block	Relevance for CHIs	Examples	Indicators	Potential Policy Levers
1. Sustainable competitiveness	CHIs contribute to sustainable competitiveness through long-term, place-based innovation. Their civic, cultural, and social value remains undervalued in traditional economic and innovation frameworks, which prioritise scale and speed over relational and inclusive practices.	Participation in the New European Bauhaus; CHIs as enablers of local innovation through trust-based partnerships; heritage-led urban regeneration.	Number of cross-sector partnerships; public value generation (e.g. social cohesion); inclusion in Green/NEB initiatives.	Fund civic-driven innovation explicitly; expand eligibility criteria in Creative Europe and Horizon to include care-based practices.

2. Regulation and governance	CHIs face regulatory fragmentation and governance constraints that limit their agility. Many operate across overlapping public mandates and require flexible, decentralised governance models that support institutional hybridity, policy experimentation, and shared directionality.	Multi-partner cultural governance models (e.g. shared ownership between city, ministry, and community); local policy labs for culture; use of legal sandboxes.	Number of CHIs in co-governance schemes; existence of decentralised coordination platforms; legal flexibility indicators.	Encourage adaptive legal frameworks; support co-governance models and multilevel cultural strategies; fund policy labs.
3. Social dimension	CHIs play vital roles in social innovation but are rarely recognised as such. Their work with marginalised groups, promotion of inclusive narratives, and facilitation of social repair processes often remain invisible to dominant policy metrics and funding logics.	Archives collaborating with migrant groups; museums as platforms for participatory democracy; cultural initiatives driven by marginalised communities.	Level of engagement with marginalised communities; community satisfaction metrics; diversity in programme design.	Mainstream social innovation in cultural policy; incentivise inclusive practices; invest in community co-creation models.

4. R&I, techniques & technological solutions	CHIs serve as platforms for participatory R&I, co-design, and interdisciplinary experimentation. Yet they remain peripheral to formal research ecosystems. Their contributions are underrepresented in R&I indicators focused on technological output or market impact.	Horizon projects like GLAMMONS, LibrarIN, CultureLabs; CHIs in digital storytelling, XR and AI-assisted engagement; inclusive co-design with users.	Participation of CHIs in R&I calls; number of tools or methods developed through collaboration; interdisciplinary project outputs.	Create specific R&I calls for CHIs; lower entry barriers for small institutions; valorise social outcomes in research frameworks.
5. Infrastructures	CHIs lack access to dedicated, shared, and affordable physical and digital infrastructure. This limits their capacity to engage in experimental or collaborative innovation. Community-based and rural institutions are especially affected by geographic and structural constraints.	Living labs hosted in CHIs; makerspaces in libraries; ECCCH digital platforms; shared tools for conservation and 3D modelling.	Access rate to shared infrastructure; ratio of physical/digital infrastructure coverage in underserved areas; infrastructure investment size.	Subsidise access to ECCCH and local digital hubs; promote regional infrastructure sharing; invest in community-based platforms.

6. Skills	CHIs often operate with outdated or narrow professional profiles. A shortage of interdisciplinary and transversal skills, including digital, participatory, and strategic capabilities, stops their innovation potential and limits generational renewal across the sector.	Training initiatives in participatory innovation; collaboration with universities and cultural policy labs; onboarding programmes for new professionals.	Staff trained in interdisciplinary skills; % of heritage professionals under 35; number of CHIs with formal learning strategies.	Develop cultural innovation skill frameworks; integrate transversal skills in higher education; support career diversification. Align EU-wide training policies with findings from the CHARTER project.

7. Investment & funding	CHIs suffer from fragmented, short-term, and bureaucratic funding models. Innovation funding tends to favour large consortia and tech-led solutions, sidelining small and community-led institutions. Microfunding and innovation procurement mechanisms are scarce but highly needed. There is also a need for more flexible grant schemes, adaptive finance models that allow iterative and exploratory projects, and funding mechanisms that accept failure and encourage risk-taking and experimentation as part of the innovation process.	Microgrants of 5–10k EUR for pilot projects; participatory budgeting for culture; CHIs included in innovation procurement pilots at city level.	Amount of micro-funding disbursed; % of innovation calls open to small actors; success rate of CHIs in accessing innovation procurement	Simplify access to funding; reserve quotas for microgrants; expand innovation procurement to include heritage actors. Develop flexible grant schemes and adaptive finance programmes that support iterative, exploratory projects. Embed risk acceptance and experimentation logic in funding criteria to foster innovation without penalising failure.

6. Literature review

Cultural heritage institutions (CHIs) are increasingly recognised as key players in open innovation ecosystems, yet their roles remain under-theorised and undervalued in dominant policy frameworks. Drawing on Jesús Fernández Fernández's foundational work on social-heritage innovation ecosystems, this literature review underscores the unique positioning of CHIs as embedded, trusted, and community-anchored spaces capable of fostering social innovation. Their ability to mediate between citizens, artists, policymakers, and researchers through storytelling, participatory programming, and care-based practices enables them to surface social needs and activate collaborative responses.

Despite this potential, several studies highlight a disconnect between mainstream innovation discourse and heritage practice. As Wijngaarden et al. (2019) demonstrate, creative practitioners often distance themselves from technocratic and economic definitions of innovation, favouring concepts such as *social impact*, *continuous renewal*, and *situated adaptation*. For many heritage professionals, innovation is not a formalised objective but a by-product of doing the work in context — a theme that also emerges in Grau Pérez's (2025) study of cultural and creative networks, which frames innovation as emergent, adaptive, and relational, occurring through dialogue and community anchoring rather than measurable outputs.

The CHARTER EU project, focusing on the future of skills in the heritage sector, further reveals how current classification systems, such as NACE and ISCO, fail to reflect the complex, interdisciplinary, and socially embedded nature of heritage work. CHARTER proposes a shift from linear value chains to a cyclical and regenerative model that recognises heritage as a social function, where people and inherited resources interact in dynamic ways. Innovation, from this perspective, is not only technical but also relational and socio-economic, tied to the need for new competences, profiles, and learning infrastructures that are currently absent or invisible in formal systems. The mismatch between occupational frameworks and real-world practices limits professional recognition, mobility, and upskilling—key elements for enabling innovation across heritage ecosystems.

Projects like ILUCIDARE help operationalise these insights by distinguishing three types of heritage-led innovation: *heritage-driven innovation*, *assimilation of innovation*, and *heritage as a resource*. These categories align with innovation intermediation roles emerging from adjacent fields (Johar 2023; Caloffi 2023), where CHIs function as network, grassroots, regime, or citizen intermediaries. These roles highlight CHIs' ability to connect actors, translate between grassroots practice and policy, support field-building, and mediate between different layers of social innovation.

Additionally, the HESIOD Observatory and Fernández's own reflections emphasise that CHIs are already innovating socially, but lack a shared language, supportive policy frameworks, or visibility within the broader innovation discourse. This issue is particularly acute for small and community-led institutions, whose contributions often remain undervalued due to rigid indicators and funding models.

Finally, in the context of what Lipovetsky calls the "heritage wave", heritage has become a vehicle for collective meaning-making in response to global crises of identity, disconnection, and

fragmentation. CHIs are not merely content holders or service providers but should be seen as innovation intermediaries, facilitating systemic transitions through participatory governance, knowledge exchange, and community-rooted practice.

In sum, the literature calls for a redefinition of innovation in the heritage field, one that includes its social, embedded, and enabling character. This includes new typologies, skill frameworks, and evaluation tools that reflect how innovation truly happens in CHIs, incrementally, collaboratively, and always in dialogue with context.

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Annexes

Annex 1: List of Interviewees

The following table presents the individuals interviewed as part of this research. It includes their names, professional roles, and affiliated institutions, reflecting a diverse range of perspectives across the cultural heritage and innovation landscape.

Number	Name	Rol	Organisation	Country
1	Philippe Kern	Director	KEA	Belgium
2	Nicolas combes	Director	Saline Royal Arc-et-Senans	France
3	Raul Oliván	Founder	Hexagonal	Spain
4	Jesus Fernandez	Director	Ecomuseu Oviedo	Spain
5	Jordi Mallarach	Executive Officer	FHR	Belgium
6	Jordi Cassasas	Director	Federació Ateneus	Spain
7	Uxio Novo	Director	Fundación Uxío Novoneyra	Spain
8	Jordi Tresserras	Consultant	UNESCO	Spain
9	Elisabetta Airighui	Researcher	ILUCIDARE	Italy
10	Oana Simionescu	Founder	FABER	Romania
11	Vesna Madzoski	Founder	SKVER	Serbia
12	Charlotte Biszewski	Manager	TYPA	Estonia
13	Rosa Cerarols	Co-founder	Konvent	Spain
14	Julius Heinicke	Coordinator	IN-SITU project	Germany
15	André Torre	Director	INRAE Corsica	France
16	Pille Runnel	Research Director	Estonian National Museum	Estonia

Annex 2: Typology of Roles of Cultural Heritage Institutions

Type	Definition	Key functions	Key practices	Governance model / Ownership	General examples	Contribution to innovation ecosystem
Cultural anchors	Institutions that provide symbolic and identity-based grounding for communities	Affirm collective identity Legitimize place-based action Enable cohesion	Curating memory and narratives Hosting rituals Acting as custodians	Public / citizen-led	Local museums, heritage libraries, memory archives, community museums, national archives	Legitimacy, trust, symbolic infrastructure, grounding
(social) Connectors	Institutions that act as platforms for participation, dialogue, and mutual learning	Facilitate engagement Host participatory processes Mediate across sectors	Forums, workshops, co-design Translating between fields (education, business, etc.) Urban-rural bridging	Public / Mixed	Cultural centres, public libraries, community labs, inclusive heritage programmes	Social capital, cross-sector enablement, co-creation and inclusion

Economic integrators	Institutions that link heritage to markets and economic flows, managing sustainability and impact through entrepreneurial or hybrid models	Design new funding models Enable economic participation Connect culture and commerce	Cultural entrepreneurship Value mediation Diversified revenue streams	Private / Public-private	Heritage attractions, cultural start-ups, market-driven site management, social enterprises linked to heritage	Ensure long-term viability by embedding heritage innovation in economic circuits; align incentives across sectors
Experimental spaces	Institutions that create room to test new ideas, methods, or partnerships in protected, flexible, or informal ways	Foster safe-to-fail environments Support experimentation Capture emerging practices	Medialabs, living labs, hackathons	Public / mixed / citizen-led	Living labs, temporary cultural hubs, hackathons, experimental archival practices	De-risk innovation, flexible environments
Field builders	Institutions that strengthen the broader ecosystem by shaping narratives, building capacity, and	Promote shared language Amplify models Coordinate	Producing research Hosting conferences	Public / Mixed	Cultural observatories, heritage education platforms, transnational	Strategy, visibility, learning networks, scaling

	cultivating shared standards and knowledge	communities of practice Broker resources	Supporting peer learning		projects on upskilling or impact evaluation	
Institutional hackers	Institutions that bend or stretch existing rules to prototype new models, navigate rigid systems, or challenge power dynamics	Expand space for innovation Prototype governance Navigate institutional constraints	Citizen-led heritage Unofficial uses of public infrastructure Negotiating ownership or access	Citizen-led / Hybrid / Informal	Grassroots archives, activist heritage projects, citizen-run museums	Expand innovation frontiers by disrupting norms and reframing institutional rules; explore new governance pathways