



Funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY GUIDE

Digital innovation in private cultural heritage management in light of the
COVID-19 pandemic in Belgium, the Czech Republic,
France, Italy, and Spain

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. The publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein. Project N°: 2020-1-BE01-KA226-VET-082730



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Abbreviations List

ADSI (it)	Associazione Dimore Storiche Italiane (Italian Historic Houses Association)
AR	Augmented Reality
ATECO (it)	ATTività ECONomica (economic activity: an alphanumeric code allocated to a business on registration and start-up)
B&B	Bed and Breakfast
BE	Belgium
COVID	COVID-19 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2)) virus
CULT	the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education
CZ	The Czech Republic
ES	Spain
EU	The European Union
FR	France
IT	Italy
PGE (fr)	Prêt Garanti par l'Etat (State guaranteed loan)
QR	Quick Response
SEO	Search Engine Optimisation
SWOT	Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities Threats
UAP (fr)	l'Union des Artisans du Patrimoine (the Union of Heritage Craftspeople)

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this document is to provide an overview of the operational setup of privately owned historic houses in Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Italy, and Spain. The information presented across the following sections was obtained through interviewing a wide range of private owners of historic houses within the aforementioned countries. This, alongside research on specific overarching aspects, was performed in order to draw conclusions and key take-aways concerning various sub-topics considered within the topic.

This summary also seeks to highlight both the similarities and differences between the private historic houses within the studied countries—with a special emphasis on digital marketing and innovation tools—as well as the available training associated with them.

Methodology

Links were made between the information and general research to draw helpful conclusions which would further guide in devising and developing innovative digital training methods for the owners of private historic houses. For example, a correlation was highlighted between the location and visibility of specific heritage houses to their lack of human materials and material required for efficient functioning.

Studying the financial management as well as the main marketing tools used by the studied heritage houses aids researchers in comprehending both the present and future challenges that the houses must face: this is particularly the case in the areas of digital management and marketing systems. It is important to note that the effects of the restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic were also analysed during this process, as well as the adaptive innovation strategies that were used to face these relatively new challenges. Finally, a Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities Threats (SWOT) analysis was also performed.

PRIVATE HERITAGE SECTOR – PRIVATE HISTORIC HOUSES

Revenue Management

For private heritage houses, both the house and the land on which it sits on are the primary, and often the most valuable, asset for the owner: hence, it forms the base of all implicated business models.¹

Other key resources of historic houses:

- Intellectual resources, such as symbols associated with the house (coat of arms, logo, etc.);
- Partnerships;
- Interested stakeholders;
- Houses' history;
- Human resources (e.g. skilled artisans, dynamic owners etc.)

However, it is important to note that in the Czech Republic, private ownership of historic houses is quite a recent development, dating back to the early 1990s. Their historic houses and their need for maintenance are indeed relatively new when it comes to their financial management.

Activities in Historic Houses

From our research, we were able to highlight the most important activities, in relation to revenue, of the historic houses, which include but are not limited to:

- Ticket sales (64% of private residences are open to the public);
- Touristic activities;
- Hospitality Operation (cafe, restaurant, B&B/hotel);

¹ De Voldere et al. 2019. *Study of Heritage Houses for Europe*, p. 135 [online]. European Landowners. Available at: <<https://www.europeanlandowners.org/heritage-houses-for-europe/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Final-Study-Heritage-Houses-FINAL-1809-online.pdf>> [Accessed 28 October 2021].

- Museum / guided tours;
- Weddings;
- Exhibitions;
- Using outdoor grounds for public events;
- Television/ film shoots;
- Opening a store;
- Educational purposes.

Indeed, other business activities linked to the grounds that bring in revenue include activities in the areas of agriculture, forestry, real estate, manufacturing, industry, and more.

In comparison with the other countries, Italian private houses do not combine accommodation with other types of activities such as management and protection of historical heritage, catering, banqueting service, and private events, or agri-food chains. In some sectors, such as wine production, historic houses represent a significant quota of operators.

Booking Systems in Houses

It has been found that historic houses across the studied areas lack up-to-date digital booking systems for making reservations: many still perform the tasks manually using Microsoft Excel. The prime reason for doing so lies in a lack of funds for advanced ticketing systems. However, even when funds are available for historic houses, their management prefers to invest directly in digital visibility rather than updating the booking system. Furthermore, sometimes funds are restricted for specific purposes, as is the case in Spain, where the financing of historic houses occurs thanks to social function grants (targeted for social functions). In the case of booking systems, only house owners/managers who have substantial funds of their own are able to invest in areas they deem fit, in contrast to area-specific grants.

Taxes and Legislations

For many houses across the 6 geographic areas, both taxes and legislation, unfortunately, interfere in revenue management for the house managers. Some examples include:

- In **Belgium**, once a heritage house is officially protected or listed, its owner is legally obliged to abide by certain regulations, most often implemented by national or regional protection, conservation, or heritage agencies. This is accompanied by the additional difficulty of obtaining administrative licenses. To introduce new activities or modify the structure of the house to raise the number of tourists, **the region must accept the changes by giving permissions to the owners, which becomes difficult due to excessive institutional decentralisation in Belgium, causing delays in the planned activities**. Indeed, Belgium has 1 federal government and 5 regional governments, with each regional government having its own legislation for its particular territory, adding significant complexity to any bureaucratic endeavor.
- In **Spain**, many of these **historic houses are classified as 'Assets of Cultural Interest' and may be subject to legal protection due to their heritage value**. This implies a fiscal and legal framework and is one of the main difficulties due to the casuistry of the regulations in Spain across all jurisdictional levels, where each region has its own regulations, varies from one community to another, and even from one locality to another. This compounds the complexity of the issue, making it seem exceedingly difficult for house owners and managers.
- In **Italy**, private houses require different commercial codes to perform any business activities. These are called ATECO codes, which use an automatic coding tool, making it possible to assign a code according to a brief description of the economic activity supplied by the user (in the Italian language).² According to the codes registered at the Chamber of Commerce, the main activities include the following:

- ◆ agri-food sector: animal breeding, production of wine;

² Igi Global. 2019. *What is ATECO Code*. [online] Available at: <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/the-cultural-relationship-management/39228> [Accessed 28 October 2021].

- ◆ hotel sector: hotels, rental and property management;
 - ◆ management and protection of historic heritage sector: management of theatres, museum activities;
 - ◆ catering sector: restaurants;
 - ◆ event sector: banqueting, organisation of conferences and fairs.
- In the [Czech Republic](#), the legislation and listed building regulations **pose obstacles in further economic development as different authorities often present contradictory requirements. This puts owners in a tough spot as they are consistently having to navigate the legislative sphere rather than focusing on developing their historic houses.**
- In [France](#), a historic house is classified as a monument that may be covered by several pieces of legislation either due its location or its use. For example, the protection legislation in France exists at the national level under the Ministry of Culture and Communication and Ministry of Ecology and Sustainable Development and Energy for buildings of national significance (*classement au titre des monuments historiques*). The protection legislation is also present at the local government level, specifically for the inscription of the buildings of regional significance (*au titre des monuments historiques*).³

In terms of tax, the inheritance tax in France for the houses varies from 5-45% depending on the amount of money/capital value inherited and the type of relationship the inheritor has with the owner of the property. On the other hand, deductions are offered on the income tax rates if the house is closed, listed, or open to the public. There also exists varying land and council taxes by region, town, or department, in addition to the wealth tax which varies from 0.5-1.5%.⁴

³ De Voldere et al. 2019. *Study of Heritage Houses for Europe*, 249.

⁴ Ibid, 255.

Marketing

In order to increase the visibility of their historic houses, owners and managers invest in marketing, enabling them to promote their properties and the possible activities to increase revenues in the long term. These marketing ventures are not limited to classic strategies such as events and exhibitions but also modern ones such as digital tools. With the world being even more interconnected than ever before in the digital realm, expanding digital tools fosters a faster uptake of information as well as, in this case, spreading the word about historic houses.

The most used marketing tools include:



Use of Social Media and Search Engines

Researching the management strategies within the five countries has highlighted the differences in marketing tools and channels used by heritage house managers.

In France, for example, marketing strategies heavily surround the use of digital tools, especially social media networks such as Facebook and Instagram, as well as websites, and on occasion being mentioned in high-level touristic websites. This contrasts with Spain

where, even though listed heritage houses that are open to the public do have websites and make use of social networks, their lack of digital competence and technology is a significant hindrance in regards to upscaling their digital presence.

Strategies used in Italy lie halfway between the French and Spanish digital strategies. Current trends in the cultural housing sector show that social media presence is greater among the largest heritage houses. **The majority of the houses in this case, as in Spain, require guidance and training in marketing and communication.**

This is also the case in the Czech Republic where the use of digital marketing tools has been found to be dependent on the activity rate of the heritage house as well as whether it is open to the public or not. Here, the use of social media and websites is most prominent in highly active houses which are open to the public.

Finally, in Belgium, whilst some houses do make use of social media and websites, the lack of funding in combination with a lack of digital skills appears as a challenge in regards to upscaling a digital presence.

Use of Paper Based Tools

Due to lack of funding, digital-savvy staff, and technological skills, a wide array of heritage houses are still heavily dependent on and make use of paper-based tools for marketing. For example, in Belgium, the *Domaine Adornes* considers newspaper and press to be their strong point and houses such as *Château d'Ooidonk* do not have social media networks such as Facebook and Instagram, which seem to be an unofficial requirement for modern-day institutions. However, the onset of the pandemic has highlighted the urgency of implementing a strong social media presence with digital marketing tools, as was the case in Belgium and Italy. This earlier mentality is in contrast with strategies used in France, where the use of paper-based tools is a supplement to digital tools.

Good Practice Marketing Examples

It is important to point out that there have been cases where the visibility of historic houses has significantly increased due to governmental aid. The project *From Stone to Stone along the river Scheldt* in Flanders (Belgium) is one such example where the Flemish government supports the partnership of private and public historic houses owners and brings their stories to the public through experiential exhibitions.

In France as well, the Ministry of Culture and the Heritage Foundation (*Fondation du Patrimoine*) set up the Heritage Mission (*Mission Patrimoine*) where through the use of websites and television programmes and informational tools, potential donors were encouraged to help the maintenance of French historical monuments through donations. The *Château de Quintin* and the *Grande Forge de Buffon* are the two monuments which have seen their number of visits increase since their participation in the mission, thus highlighting the benefits of combining governmental support with effective digital skills.

Present and Future Challenges

The interviews performed for this study, alongside the accompanying research have highlighted the main challenges, both present and future, that heritage house managers are and/or will have to manage. These include balancing dealing with listed building regulations whilst at the same time focusing on the preservation and restoration aspects of the house. Incurring high taxes, which affect the financial sustainability of the houses, in turn influencing all aspects of the houses, was also highlighted to be a significant challenge. However, **with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions associated with it, while some houses shifted their efforts and techniques to digital means, many were at a loss due to their lack of digital marketing and management skills.**

Table 1. Challenges heritage houses face in Belgium, Spain, and France.

Belgium	Spain	France
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listed building legislation Competition with neighbouring countries Transmit the importance of cultural heritage whilst managing to keep the historical sites relevant and visit-worthy Lack of digital skills and training for employees, especially during COVID-19 pandemic Lack of marketing strategy plan for visibility gaining within Belgium and abroad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No national inventory of historic houses Excessive maintenance, renovation, and preservation costs Making habitual residences profitable Constant improvement and required technological updates Historic house businesses must be planned according to social and environmental perspectives Historic houses which are classified as “Asset of Cultural Interest” might be subject to legal protection due to their heritage value Generation gap 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preservation Being visible and in competition with other major tourist attractions Connecting the historic site with the territory Adapting to COVID-19 regulations Mix economic activity with public reception Building maintenance with the revenue of the activities organised within the historic house

Table 2. Challenges heritage houses face in Italy and Czech Republic.

Italy	Czech Republic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creation of a “Touristic Product” dedicated to historic houses to help them strengthen the collaboration between houses and local activities to attract more tourists Getting access to Bank Fundings to have the chance to manage restorations and renew the houses (Private companies do not have access to this funding) Sustainability (the environmentally-friendly restoration of the historic buildings). ADSI Association has organised meetings where private owners became more familiar with such issue: “How to build a sustainable development project. Context analysis, conservation needs, enhancement prospects, management and tax aspects” Open new market opportunities in countries such as China and Russia Stay up to date with digital trends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High capital expenses requirements and restoration costs (including modernisation of the sites and the equipment) Visitor conversion rate from low to high spending customers Competition with neighbouring countries Transposable marketing outside Czech Republic/Central Europe Listed building legislation Profitability and financial sustainability (without depending on external funding/ support) Digital marketing Transmit the importance of cultural heritage while keeping the historical sites relevant and visit-worthy (new products and/or activities, embracing digitisation, modern business plans)

Needs that Might Help Boost the Tourism Activity

Both present and future challenges that historic houses face are very much linked to the restrictions enforced during the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the biggest challenges historic houses have had to face, bringing to attention the urgency of needing to adopt digital tools for marketing and managing purposes. These needs can be identified as follows:

Table 3. Activity boosting pathways for heritage house owners and managers

Activity Boosting Pathways	
Training in marketing and communication. Small houses, for example, Casino di Mare in Italy, do not take advantage of social media and some believe that this is due to lack of time/money/resources	Open more gardens e.g. the Château de Miromesnil from France, sells vegetables from their garden. Domaine Adornes from Belgium wants to give access to the garden which is interesting considering the estate is in the middle of the city
The historic house seen as a company, not as a tourist attraction	Support private historic heritage and finance restoration
Involvement of the local community	Funds for the maintenance of the houses
The educational perspective of guided tours	Education access within historic houses
Virtual tours and museums	Innovation in marketing, pricing, and policies
Technological contribution	Physical access conditions (elevator, staircases)
Better relationship with tourism agencies	Digital marketing
Cultural sustainability (cultural beliefs, practices, heritage conservation and tourism sustainability)	Transmission of “know-how.” For example, the museum dedicated to the know-how of the steel industry in Grande Forge de Buffon, France.
Public-private partnership	Cloud and digital transformation
Organisation of new activities (including activities especially-customed to kids; exclusive events on invitation only)	Using technology to bridge the digital world with the physical world in order to create a unique, innovative experience for the customer (Phygital)
Customer marketing and personalised messages—since users are nowadays less and less physically reachable, it is important to establish a relationship between the brand and the customer	Open innovation—when the owner does not only rely on internal knowledge and resources (staff) for innovation, but also multiple external sources such as competitors, public, external agencies
Smart working—using new technologies and developing the existing ones to improve both performance and satisfaction	Long-term projects involving technologies and logistics
E-commerce	Blockchain

COVID-19 Impact

The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have had a significant negative impact on the global cultural sector, affecting all involved groups, and resulting in the cancellation of the overwhelming majority of events as well as the closing of countless historic sites. As mentioned before, cultural heritage is not only a staple of local economies, but is an important percentage of the revenues of the private owners involved in the sector.

In order to prevent cultural institutions, such as historic houses, from closing, local and national governments, as well as international institutions, launched a wide variety of emergency support plans with the hopes of aiding cultural institutions in adapting to the damages caused by the global pandemic. Digitisation proved to be a very useful tool during this time as it granted the cultural sector the ability to organise events, guided tours, exhibitions, and conferences in the virtual world. However, not all involved stakeholders were able to seize this opportunity, mainly due to digital skills shortage of cultural sector workers.

In 2019, only 31% of the citizens in Europe had moderate or advanced digital skills. The Netherlands (50%), Finland (50%) and Denmark (49%) proved to be the most digitally skilled. On the contrary, above the European trend, Italy (22%) and Czech Republic (26%), as well as the close to the trend results: France (31%), Belgium (34%) and Spain (36%) explain the strong impact of COVID-19 crisis, as well as the importance of organising pieces of training on digital skills.⁵

In Europe, at the end of 2020, 42% of European citizens did not have basic digital skills.⁶

⁵ Skills Panorama. 2021. *Digital skills: Challenges and opportunities*. [online] Available at: <https://skillspanorama.cedefop.europa.eu/en/analytical_highlights/digital-skills-challenges-and-opportunities#_digital_divide_in_the_eu> [Accessed 20 October 2021].

⁶ Shaping Europe's digital future. n.d. *Digital skills coalition*. [online] Available at: <<https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-skills-coalition>> [Accessed 20 October 2021].

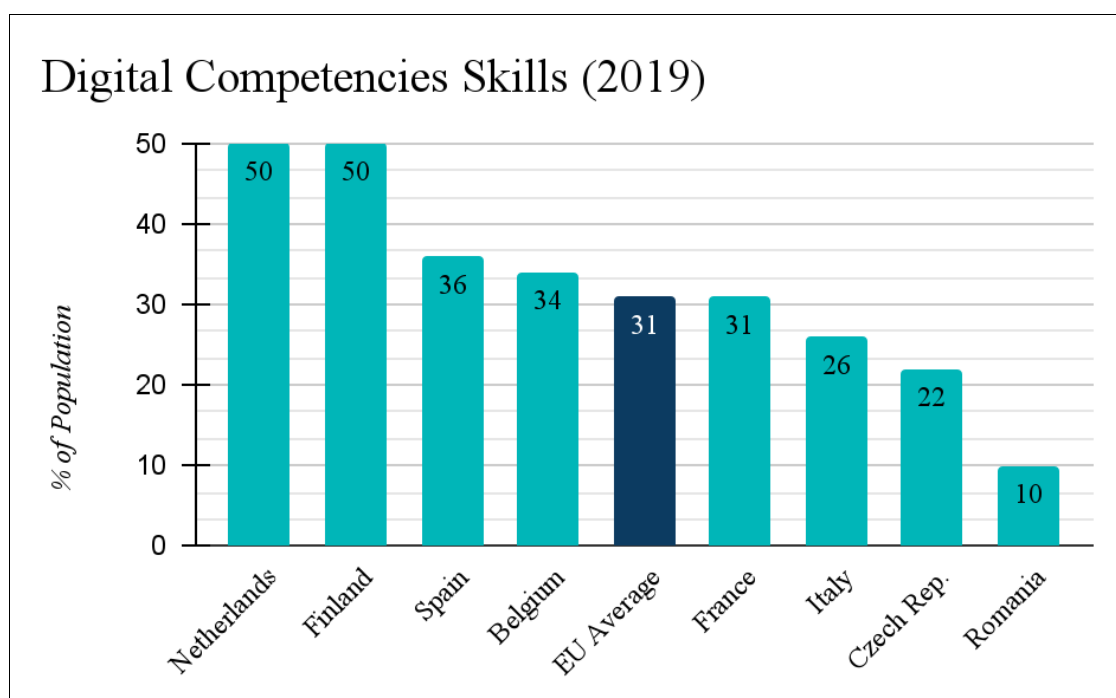


Figure 1. Digital competences of the general population of selected EU countries

This graph highlights the highest proportion of population maintaining a digital competency (Netherlands and Finland), the proportions found in the consortium countries, the EU average, as well as the lowest proportion (Romania).

Socio-economic Repercussions

In Belgium, the COVID-19 pandemic induced heavy socio-economic repercussions. The results of several surveys conducted by cultural organisations in the kingdom outlined that by May 26, 2020, the revenue decrease of the cultural sector was estimated at 90%.⁷

⁷ National Bank of Belgium. 2020. *Company turnover starts to recover but the outlook for the Belgian economy remains grim*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.nbb.be/en/articles/company-turnover-starts-recover-outlook-belgian-economy-remains-grim>> [Accessed 20 October 2021].

France has also experienced a final crisis across the cultural sector. According to a government analysis, there was a decrease of 65% in the turnover of 2020 for the management of tourist sites and monuments.⁸

Local Support

The negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic spread far and wide across the cultural sector, considerably hurting all those involved. To this, national and regional governments, alongside institutional organisations have understood this situation and have mobilised support for cultural industries across the world.

It is estimated that approximately 10 000 cultural events were cancelled during the high season in Belgium in 2020. To this, Belgian federal authorities lined up and undertook various measures to support the recovery of the national cultural sector. This resulted in a wide variety of events such as exhibitions, festivals, concerts, and other cultural events having been organised in the digital environment.⁹

In Belgium, more specifically in Brussels and Wallonia, the authorities earmarked 50 million euros for culture, sports, as well as childhood and youth policies, with a focus on the latter two.¹⁰

In sharp contrast to the two above-mentioned regions, Flemish regional authorities decided to reduce the budget for culture in January 2020, considering it “non-essential.”¹¹

Meanwhile, France has also provided rapid assistance during the crisis. A noteworthy example is the Historical Dwelling association who aided private owners with management

⁸ Ministry of Culture. 2020. *The impact of the Covid-19 crisis on cultural sectors*, p.48. [online] Available at: <<https://www.culture.gouv.fr/en/Thematiques/Etudes-et-statistiques/Publications/Collections-de-synthese/Culture-chiffres-2007-2021/L-impact-de-la-crise-du-Covid-19-sur-les-secteurs-culturels>> [Accessed 22 October 2021].

⁹ Pasikowska-Schnass, M., 2020. *EU support for artists and the cultural and creative sector during the coronavirus crisis*, p. 8. [online] European Parliament. Available at: <[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649414/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)649414_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649414/EPRS_BRI(2020)649414_EN.pdf)> [Accessed 20 October 2021].

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

tasks of the historic houses and their reopening. The Historical Residence has also provided owners with information about the State guaranteed loan (*Prêt Garanti par l'Etat-PGE*) .

Moreover, the French government offered aid to the private owners calculated on the income of the year 2019.

In Spain however, governmental support came in the form of information, rather than money. The Foundation of Owners of Historic and Unique Spanish Houses (*Fundación Casas Históricas y Singulares de España*) shared a [series of guides and recommendations with private owners](#).

Lockdowns

The cultural heritage sector was affected by the national and regional lockdowns, as well as the lack of international fluxes when regional and/or national lockdowns were lifted. Private owners are for the large part dependent on international visits, meaning that the national border closures around the world drastically reduced the activity of privately-owned historic houses, resulting in a decrease of visitor revenue.

In Belgium, there was a gradual relaunch of the cultural sector across the country in which museums and exhibitions were allowed to open to the public.

In the Czech Republic, even though there was a boom in domestic tourism as soon as the restrictions were lifted, both 2020 and 2021 experienced a substantial decrease in visitors and resulting revenues. Properties owning any outdoor spaces, as well as hospitality venues operating on a takeaway basis, were able to get through these shortened seasons with more ease due to having been able to facilitate a quick adaptation to the national restriction guidelines. In contrast, museums or exhibitions lacking a proper online presence, as well as digital skills, were the most severely hurt in terms of lack of visitors.

COVID-19 Regulations

The reopening of the sector proved to be more difficult than anticipated. A lot of preventive measures had to be taken into consideration such as barriers, plexiglass protection, and

balancing the number of visitors according to the number of square meters of the estate. These regulations contributed to the increased operational costs of the historic house. Indeed, the limitation in visitor capacity resulted in fewer customers in cafes/restaurants, causing decreased revenues. On top of this, there were more expenses due to preventive equipment: masks, tests for both the visitors and employees, and sanitary products.

Private Heritage Sector vs Public Museums

The European Parliament's **Committee** on Culture and Education (CULT) highlighted the fact that, considering that the biggest part of the private owners' revenue is drawn from sales, **private museums were much more impacted by the COVID-19 crisis than public-funded museums.**¹²

On one end of the spectrum, some historic houses were forced to permanently close their doors. While others, such as the *Domaine Ardonnes* in Belgium, lost 60% of its sales. The private owner of the *Château de Freÿr*, also in Belgium, explained that the biggest change was the fact that the number of groups decreased.

On the other side of the spectrum, despite these challenges, 80% of public museums and 83% of religious institutions were present in the virtual environment. Across Europe, 56% of the museums have dedicated staff solely for digital tasks. Museums organising virtual activities, especially ones presenting educational information, have experienced an increase in online visitors.¹³

However, as noticed throughout the interviews, this was not the case with privately-owned historic buildings. Most private owners lack digital skills and thus, not only were they seriously impacted by the pandemic, they also continued to lose a substantial part of their revenues due to their inability to adapt to the digital transition of the cultural sector.

¹² IDEA Consult et al.. 2021. *Research for CULT Committee – Cultural and creative sectors in post-Covid-19 Europe: crisis effects and policy recommendations*, p.46. [online] European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies. Brussels. Available at: <[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/652242/IPOL_STU\(2021\)652242_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/652242/IPOL_STU(2021)652242_EN.pdf)> [Accessed 20 October 2021].

¹³ Ibid.

The lack of digital opportunities and skills influenced the viability of historic houses.

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Advantages

- With restrictions in travelling abroad, there was a boom seen in domestic tourism in the Czech Republic.
- There is a realisation to value open spaces such as gardens, which led to an increase in using those gardens for public activities.
- There is an increase in the willingness to understand and practice innovative digital marketing tools such as social media and search engines.
- There is an enhancement in the use of publically-available virtual tours on the websites of the houses. For instance, even though the Great Forge of Buffon had a virtual tour available before the crisis, it was greatly appreciated by online visitors during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- There was an increase in subcontracting parts of the houses such as garden maintenance, thereby helping various aspects of the local economy in times of crisis.

Biggest Challenges of the Sector

The global pandemic brought with it specific challenges for the private heritage sector. These include but are not limited to:

- Uncertainty regarding regulations and lockdowns leading to staffing challenges, i.e. maintaining existing staff and finding new ones.
- Increased costs caused by pandemic-related rules and regulations in regards to restricting the number of visitors and incorporating preventive measures such as tests, sanitizers, and masks.

¹⁴ Europa Nostra. 2020. *COVID-19 & BEYOND: Challenges and Opportunities for Cultural Heritage*, p. 8. [online] Available at: https://www.europanostra.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/20201014_COVID19_Consultation-Paper_EN.pdf [Accessed 20 October 2021].

- Decreasing visibility of houses that prefer human face-to-face contact such as the *Castle of Miromesnil* in France.
- The loss of income during the pandemic not only affected well-known institutions such as museums but also ancillary services, which are in fact outsourced activities in the majority of cases. This is the case of companies who own and manage museum cafes, restaurants, bookshops, as well as transport services for exhibitions.
- There exist significant inequalities in regards to funds, staff, and overarching support between the largest museums, privately-owned houses, and small cultural organisations.

Visitor Statistics

The global pandemic seriously influenced the trends of visitor visit in a negative way, as shown in the visitor statistics across the continent and the world as a whole. In the Czech Republic, for example, the worst hit from the restrictions were hotels and operations which had no possibility of shifting their activities online mode or to takeaway systems. This was accompanied by loss of foreign tourism, for example in France where *Saint Saturni* lost its foreign clientele which constituted 55% of its total . However, as time went on demands for outdoor activities increased and a growth of touristic activities was seen in the gardens of the historic houses. Circumstances also changed for some houses which were dependent on large visitor groups for tourism such as the *Château de Freÿr* in Belgium.

Digital Transformation of the Cultural Sector

Digital technologies play a significant role in preserving the cultural material and cultural heritage in general in the form of online resources, as well as making the cultural sector accessible to everyone with an internet connection. Historic houses, museums, and other cultural sites which embrace this digital sectoral transformation have the potential of gaining more visibility and getting closer to their audiences by organising innovative experiences.

Digitisation helps organisations operate and deliver cultural values to their audiences. However, being able to digitally promote and manage cultural sites requires capacity building training (especially digital skills), data improvement, and infrastructure strengthening.¹⁵

Digital skills training is not common for privately-owned houses, and this was highlighted by all consortium partners. However, when it comes to the cultural sector as a whole, there are associations and projects conducted at a European level that foster such training. The key objectives of such programs are making the cultural sector accessible to everyone, digital skills training, research, and innovation.¹⁶

Technology has created an ideal tool for the cultural sector to develop, become innovative, promote values, and help heritage house owners financially. However, since there was a lack of training for those who are digitally unskilled, digital technologies did not represent an escape hatch from the crisis, but rather an additional obstacle to overcome in an already tumultuous time.

¹⁵ Daley, B., 2020. *New Europeana Strategy 2020-2025 imagines a cultural sector powered by digital / Europeana Pro.* [online] Europeana Pro. Available at: <<https://pro.europeana.eu/post/new-europeana-strategy-2020-2025-imagines-a-cultural-sector-powered-by-digital>> [Accessed 20 October 2021].

¹⁶ European Commission. n.d. *European digital heritage.* [online] Available at: <<https://ec.europa.eu/culture/cultural-heritage/cultural-heritage-eu-policies/european-digital-heritage>> [Accessed 20 October 2021].

INNOVATION

To create value and maintain their property(-ies), private heritage houses need to develop new and innovative business models as well. In both the short and long-term, this will further help in building and maintaining a positive impact on visitors, customers, and society in general. While the use of innovative tools in historic houses has been noted in Belgium, France, Italy, and the Czech Republic as highlighted in the interviews, surveys conducted with private owners in Spain outlined their lack of digital skills in implementing innovative tools for management.

Innovative Tools/Strategies Put in Place in the Consortium Countries

It has been recognised that the COVID-19 pandemic played a key role in pushing house managers and staff to shift towards innovative digital tools and come up with new ideas to deal with the challenges at hand. Some strategies and tools put in place in Belgium, Italy, France, and the Czech Republic include:

- Increasing presence on social media
- Improving reservations, booking systems, and introducing no-ticket reservations.
- Using contactless booking methods such as emails, QR-codes and payments, and check-in /check-out using WhatsApp.
- Automatic ticketing machines and the use of immersive technologies such as Augmented Reality (AR) for interactive experiences, are seen in the Czech Republic.
- Using outdoor space to hold exhibitions which comply with the local COVID-19 restrictions.
- Shifting management systems to allocate tasks focused on website and social media management
- Using mobile applications for guided tours.

- Introducing games such as “Escape game” and “Murder Party” to foster inclusivity In Italy, there is a creation of a card game called “Archiporto” based on the archives of the house.

Issues Faced in Introducing Innovation Tools

While most houses recognise the importance of using combined innovative marketing and management tools, it presents itself as a major challenge to overcome on top of everything else that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought. Overall, the interviews showcase that the houses in Spain use almost no innovative tools and when they do, they are still considerably basic and rely mostly on their social media accounts as a digital presence. On the other hand, the houses in France have shown that they make use of effective management systems involving outsourcing when needed to manage brand reputation, digital presence, and meta-search engines. In general, the following issues are faced by historic houses while trying to introduce innovative technology:

- Lack of funds and staff with little to no communication team or people to manage their websites
- Lack of digital management skills
- Lack of knowledge regarding basic website software and graphic design

Digital Competencies to Improve the Situation

This report has highlighted the urgent need to support, uplift, and empower heritage house managers in terms of their digital competences with the goal of improving their houses’ visibility and ensure financial sustainability in the long-term. Strategies to do so include introducing these managers to::

- Basic website creation skills
- Basic social-media management and digital marketing skills including graphic designing
- Relevant software training dedicated to tourism, sales, and the hospitality sector as a whole

- Online management skills with ways to manage and analyse user data and incorporate booking systems, payment methods, and donations.

SWOT ANALYSIS

The general overview of the historic houses' strengths, their weakness in the market, and the opportunities they present along with the factors posing as a threat to the houses' sustenance are all presented through a Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities Threats (SWOT) analysis.

<p style="text-align: center;">STRENGTHS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High historical, architectural, and cultural value • Deep sense of belonging of the owners to the historic house • Commitment of the owners to keep the legacy going • Multifunctionality: open to diverse services (visits, weddings, exhibitions, rentals, filming etc.) • Often having well-established landmarks nearby, encouraging the tourists to visit 	<p style="text-align: center;">WEAKNESSES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of database management skills • Lack of digital booking systems and sometimes payment methods • Lack of marketing and training • Lack of support from authorities • Difficulties in obtaining permits or having legislation that hinders innovation • Sometimes presence in rural areas disassociates the property from urban centres which are main tourist attractions • Lack of funding & High cost of maintenance and taxes
<p style="text-align: center;">OPPORTUNITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving digital and marketing capabilities to increase visibility • Creating a network with adjacent touristic attractions to create a tourist itinerary • The history, geography, and architecture of the castles are ideal to attract tourists • Finding partners to create new activities • Rapidly increasing tourism market • Highlighting the outdoor spaces, hosting more public events and increasing profitable activities. 	<p style="text-align: center;">THREATS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competition with the public sector which is free e.g. in Belgium • Lockdown • High taxes • Legislation and administrative processes • Growing labour and material costs • Absence of facilities for houses located in rural areas • Inability to make the next generation interested in historic houses

Figure 2. Summary of the SWOT analysis performed for the Summary Guide of the HERIT project

EXISTING TRAINING AND EDUCATION AVAILABLE FOR PRIVATE OWNERS/CULTURAL HERITAGE SECTOR/SMALL BUSINESSES

It is observed that there exists an overall lack of specific digital training and education programmes for private owners in the cultural heritage sector. A handful of examples of training courses and other initiatives on digital management were offered in all consortium countries and more online training courses exist at European and international levels.

Noteworthy examples of available training and education for the private cultural heritage are explained in the following sections.

Network Initiatives

Initiative Patrivia

Belgium and France gather more than 350 monuments and cultural sites (both publicly and privately owned) through the presence of relevant networks and a privately-run initiative named Patrivia. These monuments and sites are open to the public through an online platform (<https://pativia.net/home>), allowing visitors to book tickets to visit. It provides an opportunity for the house owners to display their heritage house in advance.¹⁷

VESTA in Belgium

It is a network of exceptional private houses whose owners have decided to open the houses at least partially to the public. Vesta is the Roman goddess of home, hearth and family, symbolised by the sacred fire that burned in her hearth.¹⁸ The website offers links to information to the houses and the activity programmes conducted within.

¹⁷ De Voldere et al. *Study of Heritage Houses for Europe*, p. 108.

¹⁸ Demeures Historiques et Jardins. n.d. *Vesta*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.dhj-hwt.be/vesta/>> [Accessed 26 October 2021].

Collaborative Approaches

In 2019 in Belgium, a collaboration was set up by the Belgium Association of Private Historic Houses and the Union of Heritage Craftspeople (UAP) where 40 hours of pro bono restoration works are offered by the craftspeople to the private owners of heritage houses which are a member of the Belgian Association of Private Historic Houses.¹⁹

Workshops and Training Courses

- “Listed building caretaker” course run by the Ministry of Culture in the Czech Republic, where a comprehensive overview of all related activities—from basic characteristics to legal protection to issues of the care of individual types of monuments and basic technological procedures for the repair, and restoration of monuments—are presented.
- Workshop on digital tools by Belgian association in April 2021 aiming to discuss all essential information regarding communication platforms and digital management.
- The French association the Historic House (*La Demeure Historique*), gathers the owners of private houses and provides them with training courses ranging from the realisation of works on buildings, the management of a historical monument, and its gardens and parks. On occasion a practical part with a visit to a case study complements the training too.
- The association of Parks and Gardens of Auvergne (*Comité des Parcs et Jardins d'Auvergne in France*), offers its members training courses to help them. This association specialises in the theme of parks and gardens.
- In Spain, the Foundation "Historic and Singular Houses of Spain" tries to disseminate training courses related to heritage.

¹⁹ De Voldere et al. *Study of Heritage Houses for Europe*, p. 109.

- In Italy, three years ago, the National Association (ADSI) started a collaboration with PoliMi (Polytechnic University of Milan) aiming at developing a workshop on Digital Innovation and how to use Digital Technologies.
- In October 2021, PoliMi together with ADSI will organise the third edition of the Executive Master's in the Management of Cultural Heritage and Institutions. As part of the requirements, the applicants should already work in the cultural heritage sector and who would be willing to acquire management skills. The programme is aimed at both private and public entities.
- During the autumn of 2019, ADSI organised a three-day course in Milan on Digital Marketing. It was divided into three modules: basic, in-depth social, and in-depth SEO and it was addressed to private owners and not only. The basic module focused on the necessary tools for web and social media management, as well as the use of the most representative images of the historic houses. On the other side, in-depth social presented more particularities of Facebook and Instagram whilst in-depth SEO introduced the main dynamics of the search engines functionality, as well as provided the strategic knowledge for the search engine optimisation (SEO).

Professional Courses

In France, Certificate of Higher Technician (*Brevet de Technicien Supérieur* or BTS) of Management Assistant (*Château de Saint-Marcel-de-Félines*) is offered.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Description of the Project

HERIT- *Heritage Efficient through Relevant IT use*, is a 24 month Erasmus+ funded project that started in June 2021 and will end in May 2023. It aims specifically at boosting the digital education readiness of the private owners of historic houses, helping them to face the dramatic impact of the COVID-19 crisis on cultural tourism.

The central element of HERIT is the creation of a massive open online course (MOOC) tailored for private owners of historic houses that aims at developing and enhancing the expertise of the owners themselves in business development and in the use of digital tools, as well as their knowledge of the regulatory and legal framework in the cultural heritage sector at both the national and European level.

HERIT will focus on implementing the EU policy recommendations by building capacities of digital skills in partnership with tertiary education institutions as well as national and European organisations. The main target groups of this project include all key stakeholders (current and future private-owners, landowners, employees of historic houses, etc.), who deal with historic houses, with a particular focus on the privately-owned properties. These target groups have a recognised need which this project will address.

The project consortium is composed of 7 partners from 5 different EU countries: Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier (France), Universidade da Coruña (Spain), European Landowners' Organization (Belgium), European Historic Houses (Belgium), Asociace majitelů hradů a zámků, z.s. (the Czech Republic), On Projects Advising SL (Spain), and Invasioni Digitali (Italy).

The specific objectives of the project are to:

- Mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 crisis through the development of online and digital training;

- Foster an entrepreneurial and proactive spirit;
- Maintain the jobs of local communities surrounding historical buildings;
- Enhance the visibility of the common European cultural heritage, online and offline, in order to raise awareness about and promote the cultural heritage related to historic houses;
- Promote tourism related to cultural heritage and revitalise rural areas.

Electronic Sources of the Project

Project website: *in development (updates will be provided on Twitter @ErasmusHerit)*

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/herit-erasmus/about/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/ErasmusHerit>

Consortium Partners Websites



Asociace majitelů hradů a zámků, z.s.:

<https://www.amhz.cz/en/>



European Historic Houses:

<https://europeanhistorichouses.eu/>



European Landowners Organization:

<https://www.europeanlandowners.org/>



INVASIONIDIGITALI

Invasioni Digitali:

<https://www.invasionidigitali.it/en/>



OnProjects Advising SL:

<https://www.onprojects.es/en/>



UNIVERSIDADE
DA CORUÑA

Universidade da Coruña:

<https://www.udc.es/en/>



Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier:

<https://www.univ-montp3.fr/en>

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