

# ÉTUDES URBAINES

Rapport de recherche

n° 111



Martin Müller  
Julie Grieshaber

## Culture for the Planet

A global state of the art of sustainability  
in cultural organisations

*Unil*

UNIL | Université de Lausanne

Institut de géographie  
et durabilité

We thank Katharine Turvey from International Council of Museums (ICOM) and David Baile from International Society for the Performing Arts (ISPA) for supporting our research from the initial exploratory interviews to the sending of the survey.

We thank the professionals affiliated with the following organisations that participated in the expert panel to develop the sustainability model that served as a basis for the survey: The Field Museum, Ibermuseos/Ibermuseum, Jockey Club Museum of Climate Change, La Monnaie / De Munt Opera House, Museo delle Scienze Trento, Museums Association (UK), Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Palais de Lomé, Sydney Opera House, Tate Modern, Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum.

A particular thank you to Sophie Cornet, Alison Tickell and Suhanya Raffel for reading our results previews and commenting on them.

We thank Elia Cairolì, Amélie Rywalski, Gilles Magnin and Sophie Realini for help with data entry and processing, as well as Katharina Peter for graphic support.

This research has been funded through a Swiss National Science Foundation grant → [10001H\\_189106](#).

La série « Études urbaines » publie des rapports issus de recherches menées au sein de l'Institut de géographie et durabilité de l'Université de Lausanne. L'objectif est de rendre publics et accessibles des résultats de projets traitant de l'urbain sous ses différentes facettes.

© IGD 2024

Institut de géographie et durabilité | IGD

Faculté des géosciences et de l'environnement | FGSE

Université de Lausanne | UNIL

Quartier Mouline - Bâtiment Géopolis

CH-1015 Lausanne

[www.unil.ch/igd](http://www.unil.ch/igd)

La série *Etudes urbaines* est placée sous la responsabilité de Prof. Patrick Rérat,

Contact : [Patrick.Rerat@unil.ch](mailto:Patrick.Rerat@unil.ch)

Site web : [www.unil.ch/igd/etudes-urbaines](http://www.unil.ch/igd/etudes-urbaines)

ISSN 2624-8271 (Online)

Crédit photo de la couverture : © Louise Schurr



# CONTENT

## **CULTURE FOR THE PLANET IN A NUTSHELL 5**

### **INTRODUCTION 6**

Cultural organisations and sustainability 6

Culture for the Planet 7

## **A MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE CULTURAL ORGANISATIONS 10**

Definition 10

The Sustainability Star 10

## **PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS 12**

### **RESULTS 15**

Governance Sustainability 16

Social Sustainability 17

Environmental Sustainability 18

Individual organisations 19

What influences the sustainability score? 20

What are the drivers of and barriers to sustainability? 24

## **CONCLUSION: THE ROAD AHEAD 28**

### **METHODOLOGY 30**

Database creation and contact 30

Content and analysis 32

Limits and further research 34

### **References 35**

# CULTURE FOR THE PLANET IN A NUTSHELL

Here is what our study of **206 leading museums, theatres and opera houses** reveal about their **environmental and social sustainability**.

## How sustainable are cultural organisations?



Collective need for improvement: on average, cultural organisations obtained **only 37/100** possible points in the sustainability score.



Recent phenomenon: **60% of respondents** have started integrating sustainability into their strategies **only within the last five years**.






Implementation gap: while many organisations are starting to make commitments and develop strategies, our results show that they are struggling to put them into practice.

## What are the drivers and barriers related to sustainability?

### Drivers

-  strategic relevance
-  staff activity
-  cost reduction

### Barriers

-  cost & lack of funding
-  lack of time
-  lack of knowledge

## What factors explain a high sustainability score?



**Integration into strategy:** organisations with a strong governance and comprehensive strategy around sustainability are more sustainable.



**Green team:** the presence of a green team - a dedicated internal group for sustainability action - is associated with higher sustainability scores.



**Size:** larger institutions - as measured by the number of visitors/spectators - are better at formulating and implementing strategic and environmental policies and actions around sustainability.



**Location:** national contexts and political decisions such as regulation are associated with higher sustainability scores.

## What should be the next steps?



Leading organisations should make a **collective, public commitment to a sustainability agenda** and create ways to recognize and celebrate positive steps.



The sector should **define and adopt sector-specific baseline indicators**, linked to a monitoring and labelling scheme.



Policymakers and funding agencies could **tie a part of funding to implementing sustainability measures** and achieving sustainability targets.

Read the full scientific article: Müller, M., & Grieshaber, J. (2024). How sustainable are cultural organizations? A global benchmark.



# INTRODUCTION

## CULTURAL ORGANISATIONS AND SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability has been an issue in the cultural sector since at least the 1990s. Following the publication of the Brundtland Report "Our Common Future" in 1987 (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), the idea that culture has a role in contributing to a sustainable future has linked the sector to a range of political, social and economic issues. This led to several key documents and events, such as the Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development in Stockholm in 1998 (UNESCO, 1998), the resulting Action Plan, and the Agenda 21 for Culture (UCLG, 2004).



Often praised for their contribution to social development, cultural organisations are increasingly being recognised for their role in building a sustainable society. Indeed, through exhibitions and artistic productions of all kinds, a museum or performing arts venue has a wealth of opportunities and means to communicate current environmental and social challenges to a wide audience, thus contributing to the transition towards a sustainable world.

**Cultural organisations benefit from the trust of their audiences, which collectively comprise millions of visitors and viewers around the world every day.**

In addition, cultural organisations are heavily reliant on fossil fuels (buildings, visitor and staff travel, etc.) and, like all sectors, will need to change their practices to minimise their environmental impact and adapt to the effects of climate change.

Recently, more and more cultural organisations have started to integrate sustainability into their strategic plans.

**However, while the number of commitments, reports and conferences on sustainability and culture is multiplying, there is still a lack of coordination and concrete action in the sector.**

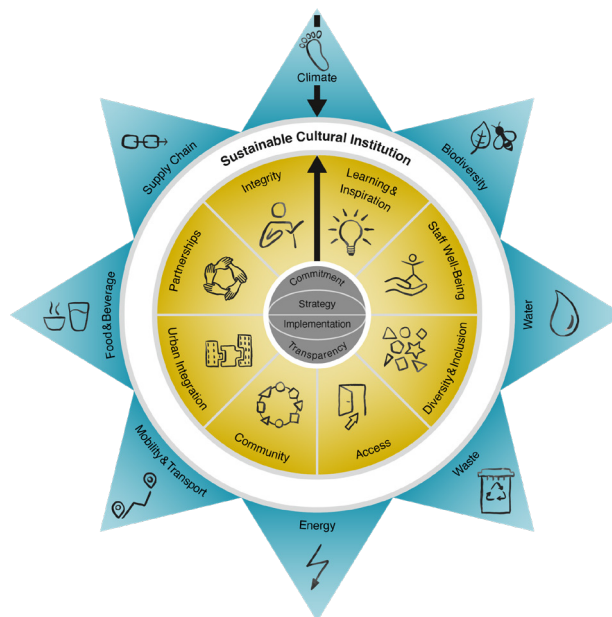
Until now, there has been no way of knowing where cultural organisations stand in terms of sustainability.

## CULTURE FOR THE PLANET

“Culture for the Planet” was a study carried out at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland, between 2021 and 2024, as part of a larger research grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation to examine the practices and policies of cultural flagship organisations around the world.

**Convinced of the unique role that cultural institutions can play for sustainability, our study sought to accompany the cultural sector on its journey towards sustainability.**

As part of this project, we developed a conceptual model for sustainability for the cultural sector, → [The Sustainability Star](#).



**We also conducted a global survey of more than 200 leading cultural organisations (theatres, museums, opera houses and cultural centres) to gain - for the first time - detailed insight into the cultural sector’s sustainability efforts.**

This report presents a condensed version of the results of this research project. The results can be used as a benchmark to calibrate and structure ongoing sustainability efforts. It is also a starting point for guiding the cultural sector towards more ambitious and systematic sustainability actions.

This project was led by Martin Müller, Professor of Geography at the Institute for Geography and Sustainability. Julie Grieshaber was the researcher on this project and also works as a sustainability consultant to public and private institutions.



 The results are accompanied by comments from Alison Tickell, Sophie Cornet and Suhanya Raffel.

**Alison Tickell** Alison Tickell is CEO and Founder of Julie's Bicycle (JB), a not-for-profit company established in 2007 to support culture to take action on climate, nature and justice. Today JB is recognised as one of the leading international organisations in this field, working with thousands of organisations, communities and change-makers to develop practice and strenuously advocate for culture to be at the heart of climate action.

→ <https://juliesbicycle.com/about-us/people/alison-tickell/>

**Sophie Cornet** Sophie Cornet was the Sustainability Officer at La Monnaie/De Munt Opera House before becoming the CSR responsible at KANAL-Centre Pompidou in Brussels, where she is responsible for defining and implementing the organisation's sustainability strategy. Between 2021 and 2023, she has been coordinating the meetings and some of the work of the Collectif 17h25, a group of opera houses that reflect on more eco-responsible ways of creating and producing opera. During that period, she also sat on the steering committee of Opera Europa's Sustainability Forum.

→ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/sophiecornet/>

**Suhanya Raffel** Suhanya Raffel is the Museum Director of M+, located in Hong Kong's West Kowloon cultural district, since her appointment in 2016. Since joining M+, Raffel has led the museum's mission, expanding its international reach and championing its deep connection with the local community. Raffel has been appointed as the President of CIMAM, the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art (2023–2025), and has been a member of the CIMAM Board since 2016. She is also a member of the Bizot Group (2021 ongoing).

→ <https://www.mplus.org.hk/en/people/suhanya-raffel/>





An academic article was also published in the scientific journal “Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy”. Some quotes from the article are included in this report, and the full version can be found at the following link:

→ Müller, Martin, and Julie Grieshaber. 2024. “How Sustainable Are Cultural Organizations? A Global Benchmark.” Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy.



Texts in brown are quotes from the original article by Martin Müller and Julie Grieshaber.

You can find an interactive version of this report at the following link:

→ <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/0edddae978c04b3f9e3444fa42301f9b>

# A MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE CULTURAL ORGANISATIONS

## DEFINITION

For the purposes of this research project, and to gain a clearer view of the leverage points of a cultural organisation, we first developed a definition of a sustainable cultural organisation with a panel of eleven cultural organisations and associations (see ↘ [Methodology section](#) for details):

≡ A sustainable cultural organisation... engages in a continuous process of safeguarding and improving environmental health, while creating social value and promoting human wellbeing throughout the full range of its operations for this and future generations. (MÜLLER AND GRIESHABER, 2024)

This definition places equal emphasis on the social and environmental aspects of sustainability, as one cannot aim for a world within planetary boundaries without considering the wellbeing of its human inhabitants. This is as true at the global level as it is at the level of an organisation.

## THE SUSTAINABILITY STAR

In order to assess the sustainability of cultural organisations, we have developed a conceptual model with specific relevance to the cultural sector. By model, we mean a condensed, simplified representation of what sustainability means for cultural organisations. The model is based on an extensive review of academic and practitioner literature and has been refined through an iterative feedback process in close collaboration with sustainability practitioners from cultural organisations around the world.

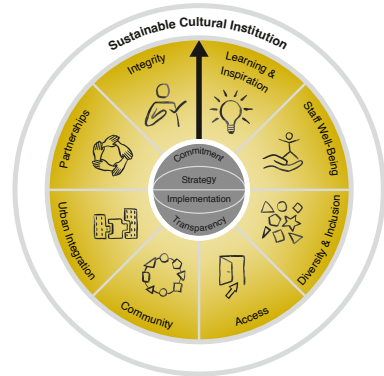
**The model allows assessing the progress of organisations such as museums, opera houses and theatres on the way towards sustainability.**

We called our model the ‘Sustainability Star’. The sustainability star has three spheres:

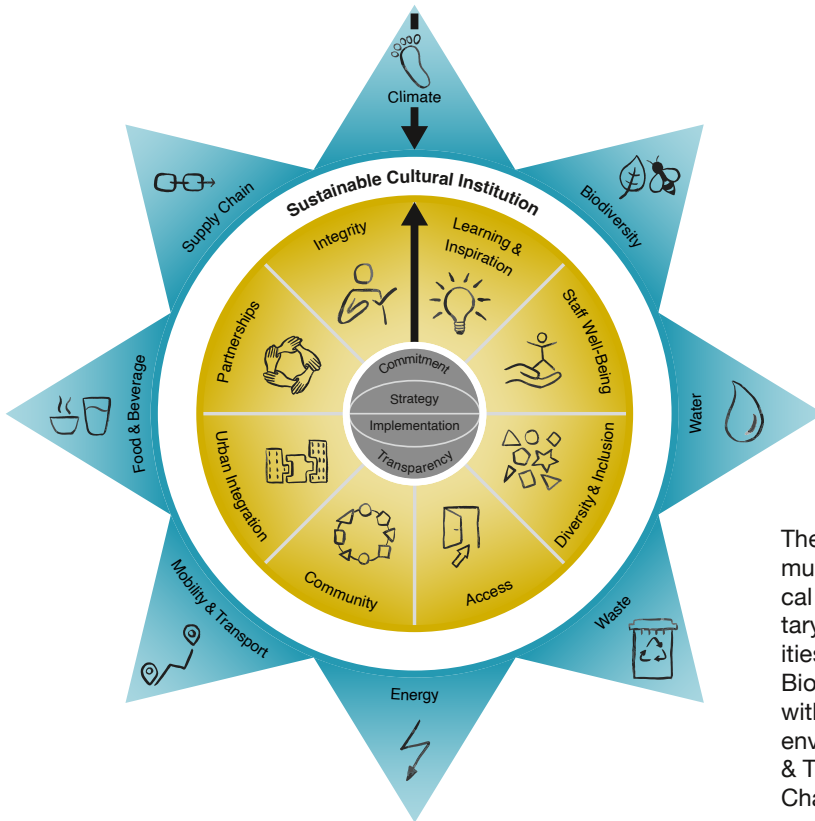
- The Governance Sphere: four essentials that each sustainable organisation needs to cover
- The Social Sphere: eight dimensions that cover people-related challenges
- The Ecological Sphere: eight dimensions that cover environment-related challenges



The **governance sphere** contains four essentials without which a journey towards sustainability would be compromised: public and internal commitment to verifiable sustainability goals, inclusion of sustainability into the strategy of the museum, systematic monitoring of what we call Key Sustainability Indicators (KSI), and finally regular reporting on progress.



The **social sphere** puts social justice and human well-being centre stage. Its dimensions cover the internal processes in the museum (Staff Well-Being), the relationships to visitors and the larger community (Diversity & Inclusion, Access, Community, and Learning & Inspiration) and the larger public and other organisations (Urban Integration, Partnerships, Integrity).



The **environmental sphere** covers the museum's relationship to the biophysical part of the planet. It includes planetary boundaries impacted by the activities of cultural organisations (Climate, Biodiversity, Water) as well as activities with potential adverse impacts on the environment (Waste, Energy, Mobility & Transport, Food & Beverage, Supply Chain).

The sustainability star: a model for sustainable museums with three spheres: governance sphere (= centre), social sphere (= inner circle), environmental sphere (= star points). The closer it is to the white ring, the more an organisation has made progress towards sustainability. See Methodology for a detailed description of the dimensions.

© Martin Müller and Julie Grieshaber | University of Lausanne

The four essentials and sixteen dimensions of the sustainability star give equal weight to the social and environmental spheres, emphasising that people are part of the planet and that tackling environmental challenges should go hand in hand with improving people's wellbeing.

We evaluated each of the dimensions in the survey.

→ [Find here](#) the complete article on the Sustainability Star published with ICOM Voices. For more details on the methodology behind the survey, please go to the [relevant section](#).

# PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS

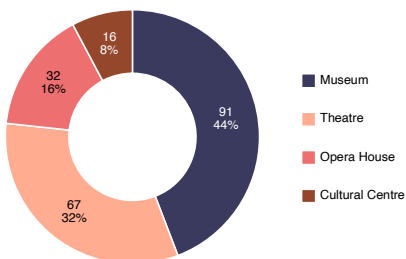
In June 2022, we invited 821 leading cultural organisations around the world (museums, theatres and opera houses) to take part in our sustainability survey.

206 organisations responded, representing an above average response rate of 25.1%.

**This underscores the interest in sustainability and makes this the largest survey of sustainability in museums and performing arts venues to date.**

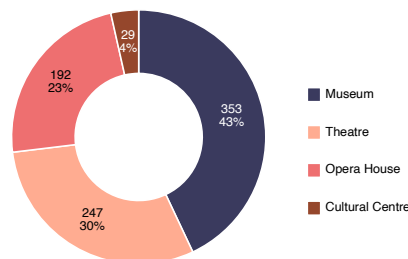
Museums represent the largest group of respondents, with 91 responses. More than half of these are art museums. The second largest group are theatres (67), followed by opera houses (32) and cultural centres (16). This reflects the initial proportions of each type of organisation that we initially contacted.

Responses: number of organisations by type



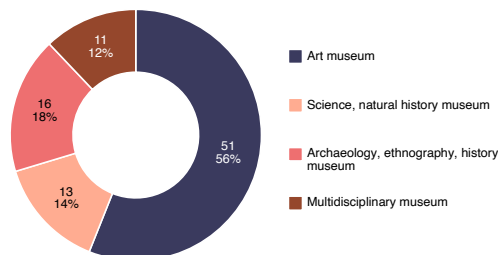
2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairoli | martin.muller@unil.ch

Database: number of organisations by type



2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairoli | martin.muller@unil.ch

Responses: number of museums by type



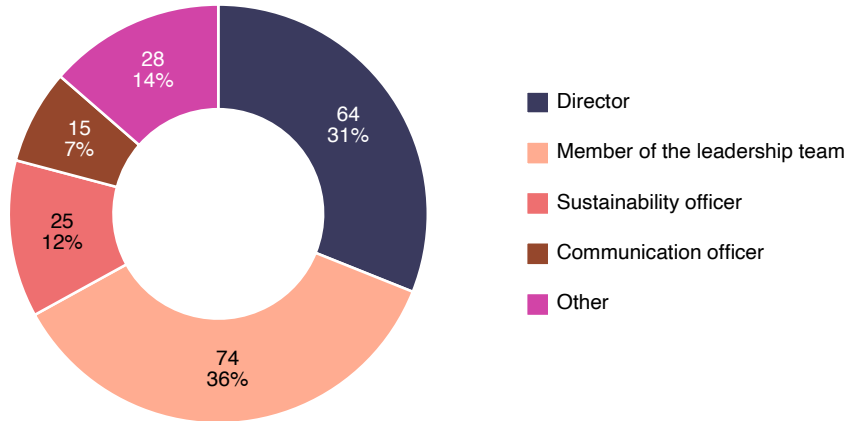
2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairoli | martin.muller@unil.ch

## → related research

For another interesting survey on sustainability in the cultural sector, you can check the → [NEMO report](#), which focuses on European museums and how they address the climate crisis. Julie’s Bicycle also conducted a → [study](#) focusing on national policies for culture and the arts and their alignment to global climate goals.

Our survey caught the attention of the management of cultural organisations. 68% of respondents are either the director or a member of the board. The third most common position (12%) is that of sustainability officer, showing that this new professional role is beginning to take hold in the cultural sector.

## Role of person responding



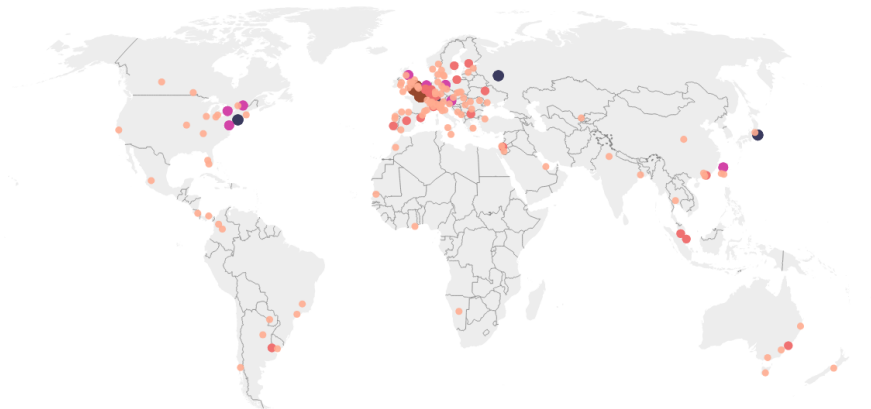
2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairoli | martin.muller@unil.ch

“This high response rate from the management demonstrates that sustainability within cultural institutions has moved in a few years from a purely operational approach coming from teams, often technical, to a political and strategic positioning of management.”  
- SOPHIE CORNET

We contacted and received responses from all over the world, but with a clear concentration in Europe and North America.

## Results: geographic distribution of organisations per city

Number of organisations  
 1 2 3 4 ≥ 5



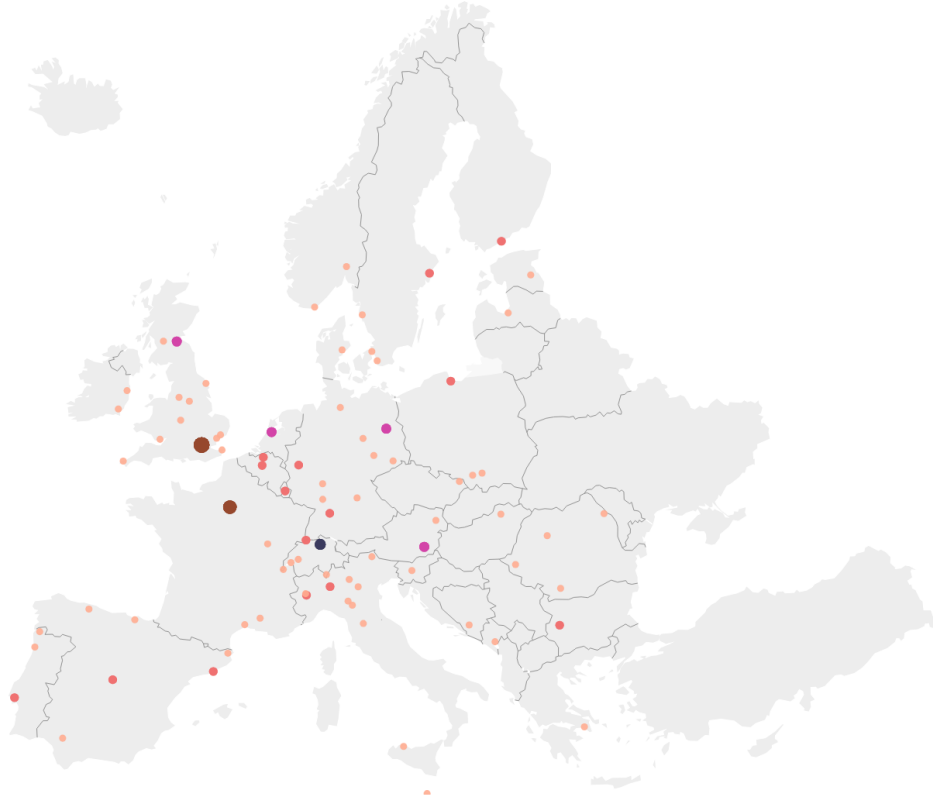
Map: 2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairoli | martin.muller@unil.ch • Created with Datawrapper

Zooming in on the European continent, we managed to include organisations in almost every country. Not surprisingly, large cities, particularly Paris and London, have the highest number of responses.

## Results: geographic distribution of organisations per city, zoom on Europe

Number of organisations

1 2 3 4  $\geq 5$

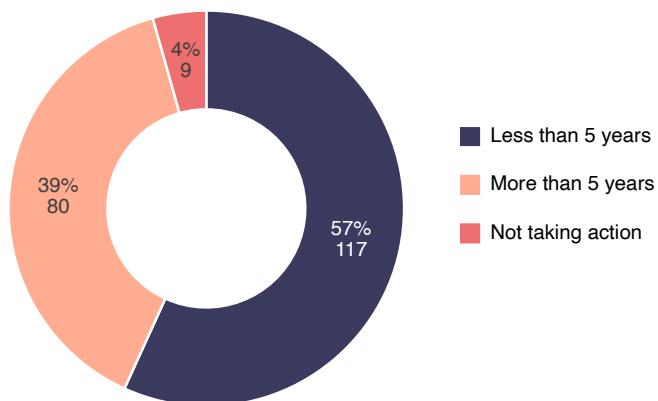


Map: 2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairolì | martin.muller@unil.ch • Created with Datawrapper

## RESULTS

Our survey shows that sustainability is a recent phenomenon at management level in the cultural sector: of the 206 organisations that reported working on sustainability, 61% indicate that they have been doing so for five years or less.

### Since when has sustainability been a topic/question for your organisation?



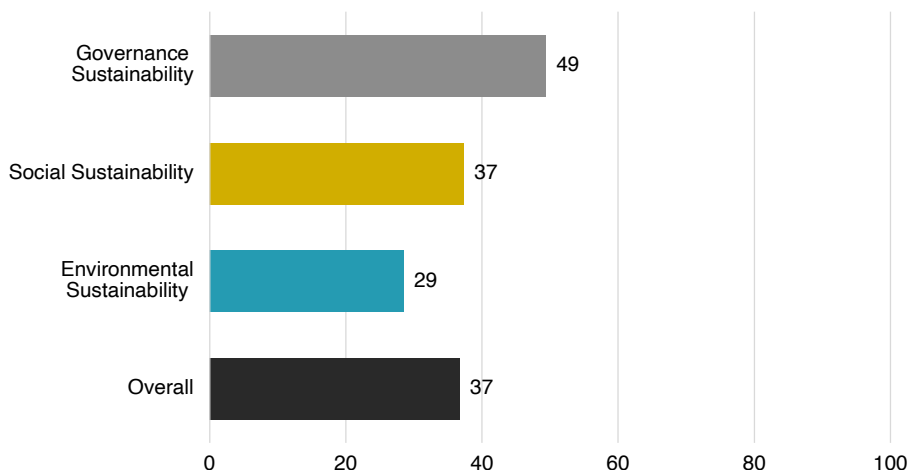
2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairoli | martin.muller@unil.ch

As mentioned in the introduction, discussions on sustainability in the cultural sector are not new, whether internationally or academically. **However, this finding suggests that it is only in the last five years that these discussions have started to have a concrete impact on the agenda of cultural organisations.**

🔍 “This research tells us that there are sticking points – ennui, bureaucracy, siloing issues, a lack of structural and policy support, and the sheer inconvenience of doing things differently, hindering progress. This is particularly true in the case of environmental commitments, which consistently lag behind (perhaps because it is the newest area of cultural practice) and where environmental action lags behind intention.” - ALISON TICKELL

**Out of a maximum score of 100 points, the mean average across all dimensions (Governance, Social and Environmental) is 37.** Organisations are most advanced in the strategic aspects of sustainability (“Governance Sustainability”), followed by “Social Sustainability”. “Environmental Sustainability” scores the lowest, indicating that overall few actions are being taken in this area.

## Results: overall scores



2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairoli | martin.muller@unil.ch



“This fascinating study is a glimpse into a sector on the move. Grappling with the practical and intellectual challenges of the climate crisis, many cultural institutions, though still at the foothills of change, are keen to be a part of it. However, the research shows that there are still unnecessary silos between issues of ‘sustainability’ and that climate and the environment are not yet taking their place as issues of critical concern.” - ALISON TICKELL

In the following sections we look at the details of each sphere of the Sustainability Star.

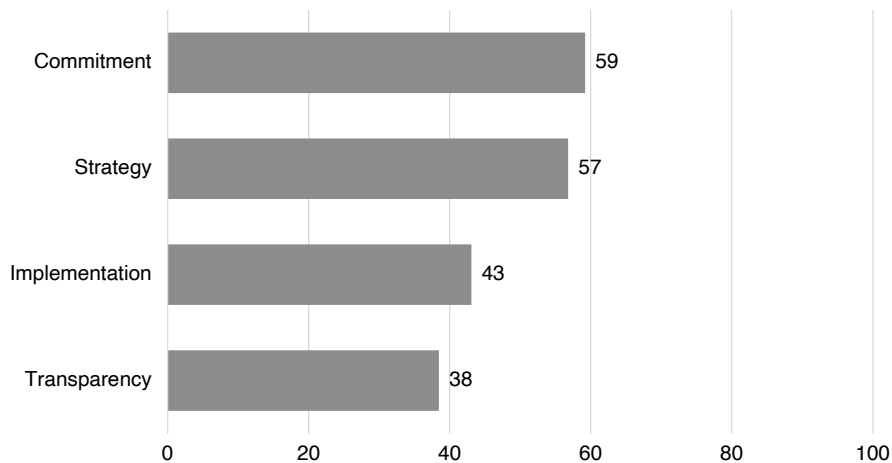
### GOVERNANCE SUSTAINABILITY

Governance is divided into four dimensions that reflect the different stages an organisation goes through in a sustainability journey (commitment, strategy, implementation, transparency).

The scores gradually decrease as the activities become more advanced: organisations first commit to sustainability, then make it part of their strategy, find tools and people to implement it, and finally make their efforts visible.



### Results: mean scores for Governance Sustainability dimensions



2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairoli | martin.muller@unil.ch

Many organisations are quite advanced in terms of commitment and strategy, suggesting that sustainability is beginning to be recognised as an important part of the role of a cultural organisation. However, when it comes to implementation and reporting, the scores drop below the average.

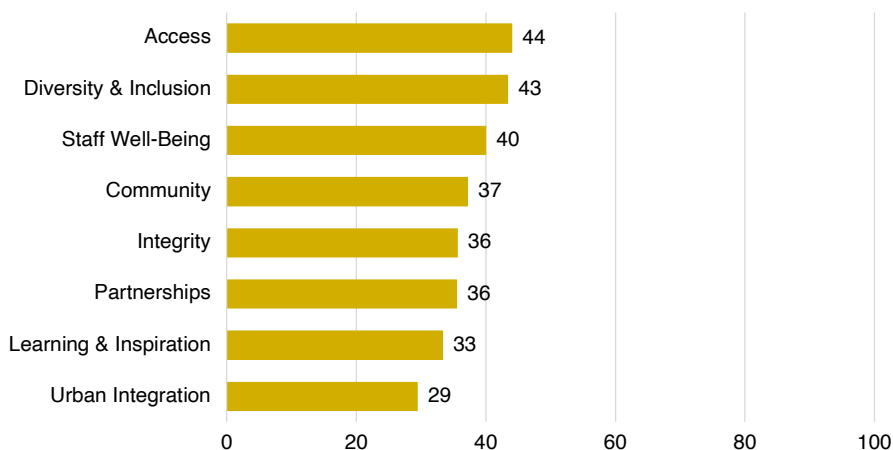
**This suggests that many sustainability commitments have not yet been put into practice and that cultural organisations may need tools to help them implement, monitor and communicate their actions.**

### SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Social Sustainability scores range from 29 to 44 depending on the dimension. Access and Diversity & Inclusion are the dimensions with the highest scores, while Learning & Inspiration and Urban Integration are the lowest.

**This result suggests that the activities in which organisations are most advanced are practical and at the heart of contemporary debates.**

### Results: mean scores for Social Sustainability dimensions



2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairoli | martin.muller@unil.ch

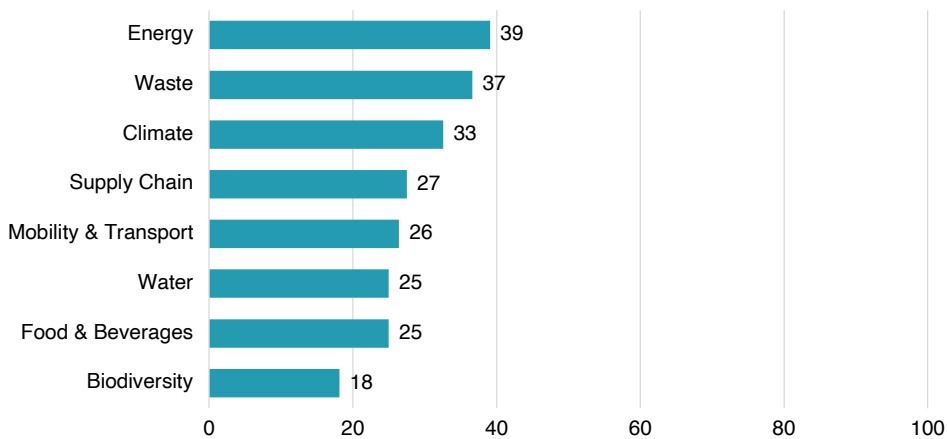
Learning & Inspiration is the dimension that is most specific to cultural organisations, as it includes contributing to increasing stakeholders' knowledge of sustainability issues and providing new perspectives on how to achieve sustainable lifestyles. However, it is one of the dimensions with the lowest scores, indicating that cultural organisations still struggle to use their platform and content as a voice for sustainability. There is also room for improvement in the role of cultural organisations in local and regional development.

## ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Environmental Sustainability scores range from 18 to 39, depending on the dimension.

**Dimensions such as energy, waste and climate have the highest scores among the environmental dimensions.**

### Results: mean scores for Environmental Sustainability dimensions



2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairolì | martin.muller@unil.ch



“What is yet to be developed is actually how we manage, you know, committing to reducing carbon emissions, which is about measuring your carbon footprint and then establishing mitigation measures. Which of course requires resources. But also a commitment from all aspects of the facilities, management, tutor, exhibition delivery and so on within the museum sector.”

- SUHANYA RAFFEL

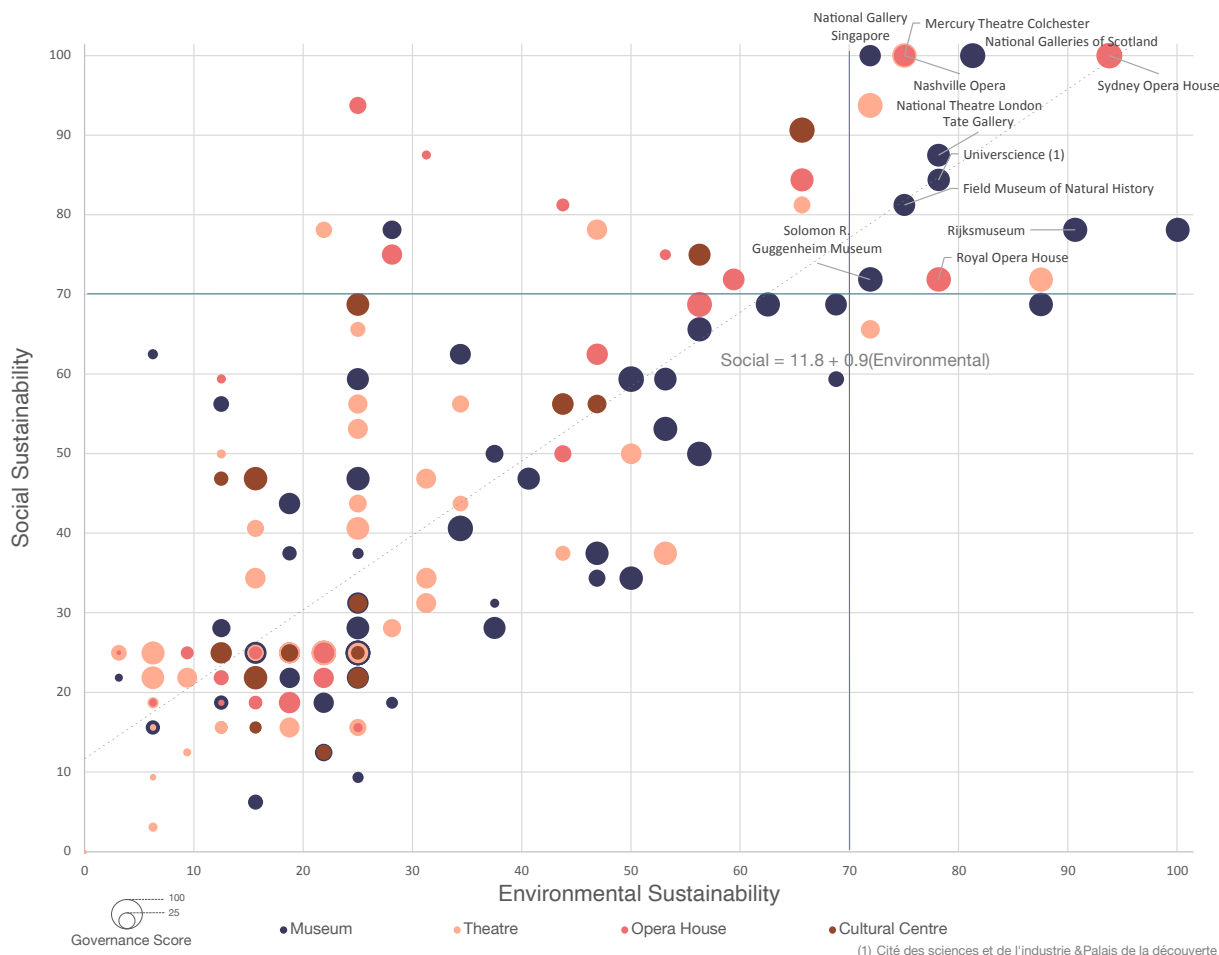
It is interesting to note that the survey was launched before the European energy crisis, which leads us to believe that the score could be even higher if we were to conduct the survey again. Waste is also at the centre of the current debate on sustainability in cultural organisations. This could be explained by the public visibility of sets and the development of the concept of ‘eco-design’ in recent years.

The score for biodiversity is the lowest: many participating organisations indicated that this dimension does not apply to cultural organisations. However, as cultural organisations are often located in urban areas, biodiversity remains an important dimension to consider. Food & Beverage has the second lowest score, despite being an important lever for an organisation to consider. For example, choosing to offer vegetarian food has little impact on working practices while significantly reducing food-related emissions.

## INDIVIDUAL ORGANISATIONS

By combining the different aspects of sustainability, organisations are categorised into three types: Social Champions (top left), Environmental Champions (bottom right) and Sustainability Champions (top right).

### Results: sustainability scores by organisation



**The vast majority of organisations (74%) are still at the beginning of their journey. This confirms that sustainability at management level is still a recent phenomenon in the cultural sector.**

Only two organisations fall into the “Environmental Champion” category. Environmental sustainability, as opposed to social sustainability, is much less wide-spread among cultural organisations, perhaps because it did not emerge in the cultural sector until the late 1990s. By contrast, the goal of ‘cultural democratisation’, encouraging wide access to cultural organisations, was already developed in the 1960s and is strongly linked to issues of access and diversity.

Organisations with a high Governance score are most likely to be Sustainability Champions. This underscores the importance of having a comprehensive strategy when making a commitment to sustainability. However, as the graph shows, a high governance score is no guarantee of being a Sustainability Champion.



“The core indicators of this research are intimately connected to one another – progress of one will affect the others – and so balancing our resources across priority areas and sharing knowledge is a huge opportunity for culture.”

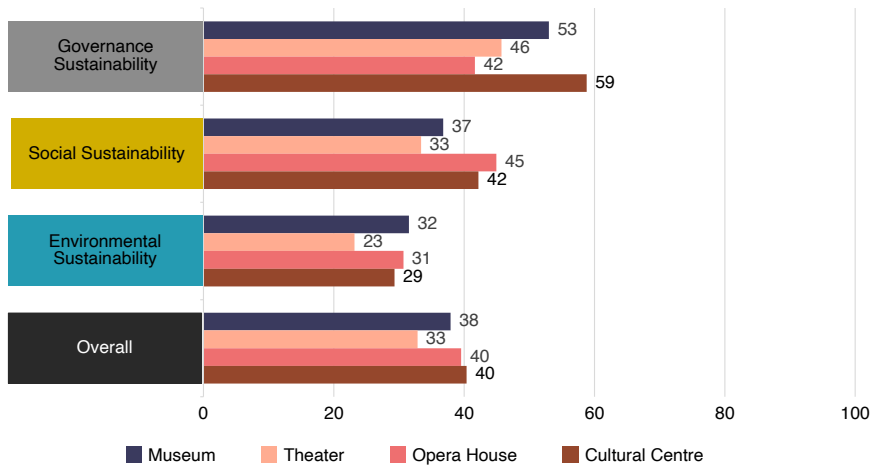
- ALISON TICKELL

## WHAT INFLUENCES THE SUSTAINABILITY SCORE?

The level of sustainability depends on many factors, such as the type of organisation, its location, as well as the type of audience and internal governance and characteristics.

Overall, the differences between the types of organisations are not significant, except for theatres, which score the lowest. However, when looking in more detail, multipurpose cultural centres and museums score higher on Governance than performing arts organisations, which means that they make sustainability part of their overall strategy. Theatres, in contrast to opera houses, tend to score lower on both environmental and social sustainability. Among museums, natural history and science museums have a much higher score for Biodiversity than other museum types, suggesting that their mission has a direct impact on this dimension of sustainability.

### Results: sustainability score by type of cultural organisation

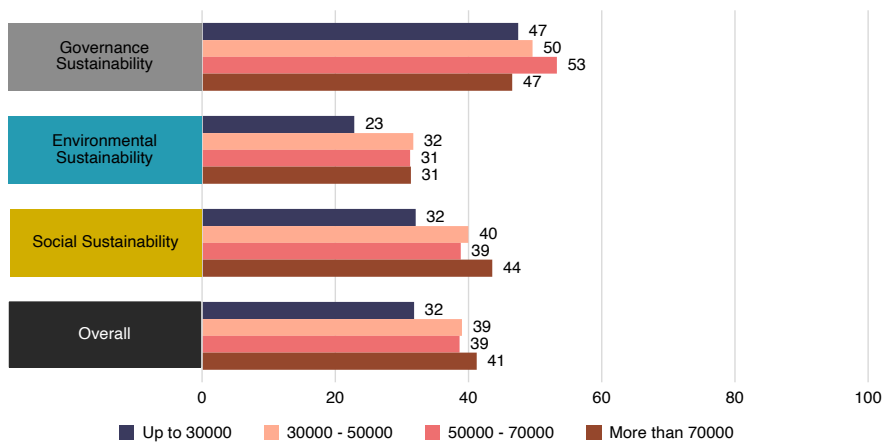


2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairoli | martin.muller@unil.ch

### Sustainability scores also vary according to the location of institutions.

Gross National Income (GNI) per capita is only relevant below a certain threshold: \$30,000 per capita seems to be a turning point for sustainability, as organisations in countries with lower GNI have lower sustainability scores, especially in the environmental and social dimensions. The Governance score is less affected by GNI, perhaps because it is the implementation of actions that is lagging behind, and because governance-related measures are less costly to implement. Despite these variations, GNI is not a predictor that is able to statistically explain the level of sustainability of a cultural organisation.

### Scores per GNI per capita in US\$ (Atlas Methodology) 2021

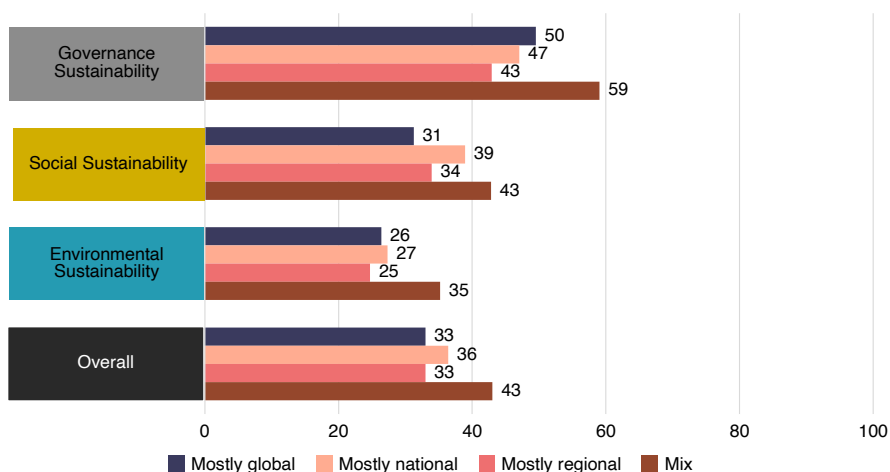


2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairoli | martin.muller@unil.ch

≡ “A location in the UK provides additional explanatory power on top of the other factors above, which hints at the importance of the specific national and sectoral context in that country. The mandatory sustainability reporting for all organisations funded by the British Arts Council could explain this difference, as well as the strong presence of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on culture and sustainability and the large offer of tools and programs available to UK-based institutions (see for example Creative Climate Tools).” (MÜLLER & GRIESHABER, 2024)

The characteristics of the organisation’s audience also influence the sustainability score. Organisations that attract regional but also national and international visitors tend to score higher on the governance dimensions. However, this type of organisation tends to score lower on the environmental and social dimensions than local or regional organisations.

### Results: scores by main type of audience



2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairoli | martin.muller@unil.ch

**The need to report on sustainability may be higher in internationally recognised organisations, but the actual implementation of social and environmental measures may not automatically follow.**

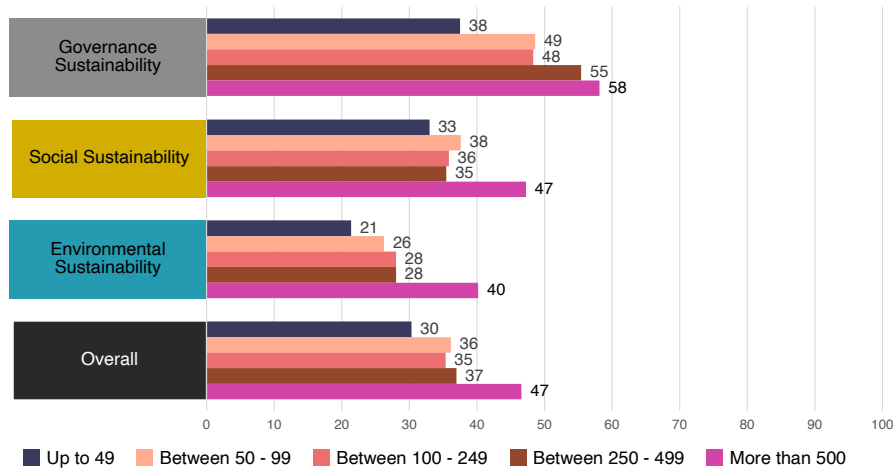
≡ “The size of the organisation [as measured by the number of visitors/spectators per year] contributes strongly to explaining outcomes for the governance, environmental, and composite score, but is not significant for the social sphere. This result suggests that larger institutions are better able at formulating and implementing strategic and environmental policies and actions around sustainability.” (MÜLLER AND GRIESHABER, 2024)

The size, age and funding model of the organisation are also associated with differences in the sustainability scores. Organisations with more full-time equivalents score higher on all dimensions of sustainability. Smaller organisations may have fewer resources to implement actions.

≡ “The presence of an internal green team is the most important predictor of relatively higher sustainability scores. This finding suggests that in-house initiatives are important in driving sustainability action, at least in what appears to be the early stage of a sustainability transition in the cultural sector”.

(MÜLLER AND GRIESHABER, 2024)

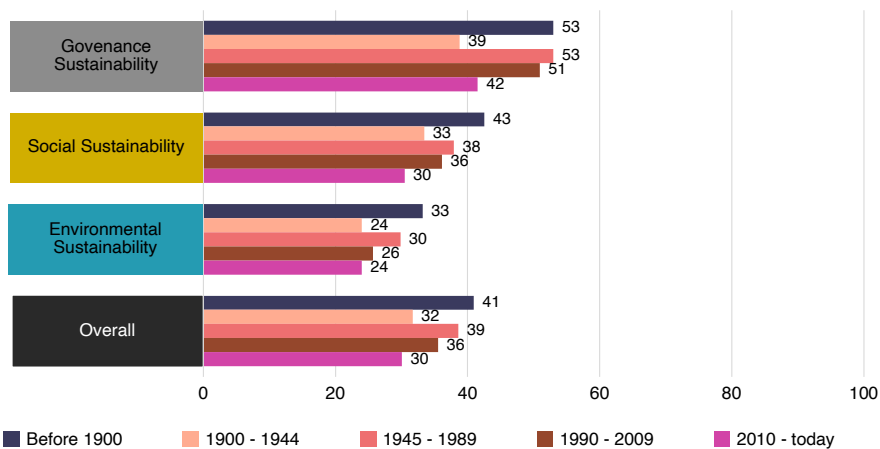
**Results: scores by number of staff (full-time equivalent)**



2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairoli | martin.muller@unil.ch

The oldest organisations are the most advanced in terms of sustainability. This may be because older organisations tend to be larger and more established. Newer organisations will have had less time to take action and have not yet managed to implement plans. Indeed, younger organisations still score quite well on governance, but their scores drop when it comes to environmental and social sustainability. All organisations, regardless of their year of foundation, score higher on social aspects than on environmental ones, again illustrating the recency of environmental concerns.

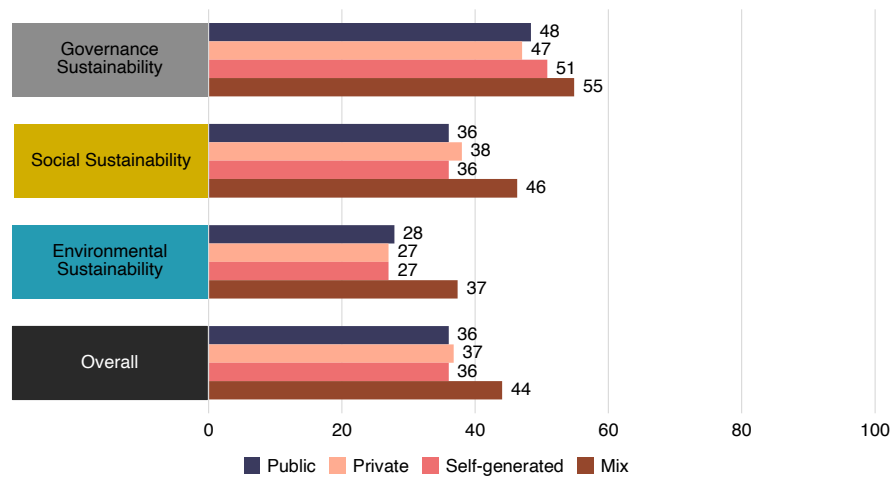
**Results: scores by period of inauguration**



2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairoli | martin.muller@unil.ch

Greater diversity in terms of funding source or visitor provenance results in a higher sustainability score. Similar to organisations with mixed visitor provenance, the higher scores of organisations with mixed funding models could be explained by the **greater number of interests and demands that these organisations have to respond to, which encourages them to be more open to sustainability.**

### Results: scores by principal source of funding



2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairoli | martin.muller@unil.ch

Finally, it is important to note that not all of the factors discussed above are statistically significant predictors of sustainability that could explain higher or lower scores.

**In the academic article (Müller & Grieshaber 2024), we identify only three statistically significant predictors of higher overall sustainability scores: the presence of a green team, the size of the institution and location in the UK.**

Conversely, many structural factors, such as the type of organisation and the wealth and political situation of an organisation's home country, are not significant in explaining the sustainability scores. This result is encouraging, as changing such structural hurdles would be beyond the control of organisations.

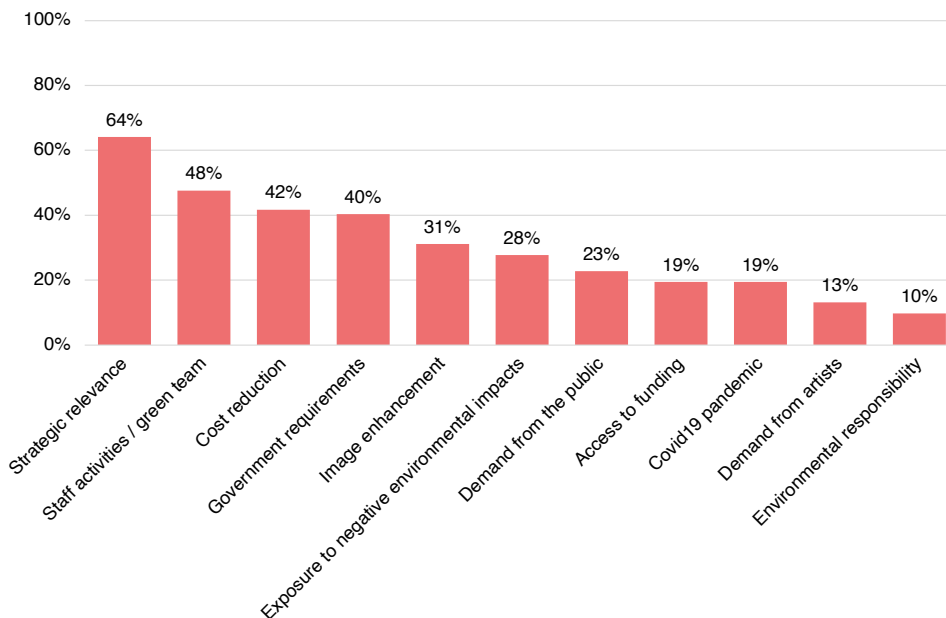
## WHAT ARE THE DRIVERS OF AND BARRIERS TO SUSTAINABILITY?

There are many reasons for an organisation's decision to embark on a sustainability journey. Drivers and barriers can come from within the organisation, but external factors also play a role.



The survey results show that ‘strategic relevance’ is a dominant driver for 65% of organisations. Employees also play an important role in an organisation’s sustainability journey, with 48% of organisations citing them as a driver. The creation of an internal green team is often the starting point before sustainability is institutionalised at an organisational level.

### Results: drivers of sustainability action



2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairoli | martin.muller@unil.ch

Note: ‘Environmental responsibility’ is a category created a posteriori

**As mentioned above, the presence of a green team is an important step towards sustainability, as it is a predictor of a higher sustainability score.**



“From Hong Kong and M+ perspective, we have been working very diligently to identify our aspiration, to develop this agenda and activate it. But we have also begun by bringing in the entire staff to get involved in this agenda. Because I think with any change, it needs to be a crossing situation: bottom up, top down. They have to happen together. And what is very, very energising for us is to see how the staff have embraced this.” -**SUHANYA RAFFEL**

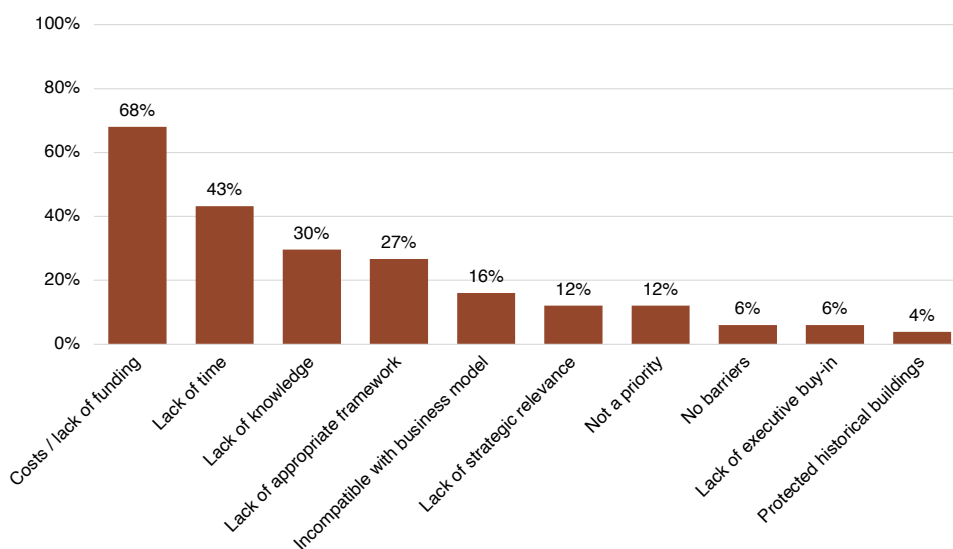
Financial considerations are also driving sustainability engagement. Cost reduction is a driver for 41% of organisations and could become even more important as energy prices rise. In many European countries, cultural organisations are funded by the public sector and are obliged to align their strategy with the requirements of their national or local government. In the UK, for example, theatres and museums are required to report on their level of sustainability. This type of requirement appears as a driver in the sustainability journey of 40% of organisations.

**Government requirements are correlated with a higher overall sustainability score, suggesting the need for specific policies from funding bodies.**

In contrast, engagement with sustainability is much less likely to result from requests from audiences or artists. Most cultural organisations in our survey have not felt pressure from these stakeholders. This may change in the coming years as public awareness of sustainability issues increases. The same applies to access to funding, which is not currently seen as a driver. However, there are more and more examples of organisations managing to attract funding as a result of their sustainability commitments or actions.

**Among the barriers, cost and the associated lack of funding are by far the most important obstacles to implementing sustainability measures.**

**Results: barriers to sustainability action**



2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairoli | martin.muller@unil.ch

This is linked to other commonly cited barriers: lack of time and knowledge. Indeed, in the absence of time or expertise, organisations turn to hiring a sustainability officer or outsourcing to a consulting firm, which generates additional costs. Internal green teams, which are less expensive, often lack specific sustainability training and the bottom-up process may result in actions that do not fit into a larger strategy. Interestingly, cost (reduction) is cited as a driver of sustainability, but also as a barrier to sustainability engagement.



“Sharing, cooperation and mutualisation have become essential levers for research and innovation, which also enable institutions to increase their skills, achieve economies of scale and generate new working practices. In this respect, we note that more and more funding mechanisms are emerging that allow the implementation of new projects and new collaborations within the performing arts sector. As a result, consultants with expertise in these specific

sustainability issues in the cultural sector have emerged in increasing numbers in recent years to support these projects.” -SOPHIE CORNET

Lack of management support and lack of strategic relevance are not common responses, indicating that sustainability is beginning to be recognised as a relevant challenge to be considered in the future development of any organisation.



“As far as the obstacles to sustainability are concerned, the survey surprisingly reveals that management commitment is not a main barrier to sustainability. In most of our opera houses, it is indeed management decisions that enable concrete changes, such as programming, definition of the level of ambition of the approach, budget, financial resources, etc.” - SOPHIE CORNET

Identifying drivers and barriers provides a better understanding of the dynamics behind sustainability in cultural organisations, allowing for the development of targeted policy interventions that build on the drivers and reduce the barriers.

The link between drivers and barriers and the sustainability score is further analysed in our article → [Müller and Grieshaber, 2024](#).

## CONCLUSION: THE ROAD AHEAD

Our findings show that sustainability is a recent phenomenon at the management level of cultural organisations, but one that is rapidly gaining interest. The high response rate and interest in the results indicate that sustainability is rapidly moving up the cultural agenda.

**While many organisations have made commitments and developed strategies, our results show that they are struggling to put them into practice.**

On the positive side, Social Sustainability is a well-known issue for cultural organisations, although there is still room for improvement, particularly in their role as agents of change. Environmental Sustainability, on the other hand, will need to be addressed more systematically.

**Cultural organisations need to approach Environmental Sustainability as a holistic idea, going beyond climate, energy and waste.**

Drivers and barriers to sustainability are many and varied, but strategic and financial issues are key to organisations' successful engagement. External drivers are likely to become increasingly important as stakeholder pressure may increase. Barriers are interconnected, making them more difficult to overcome.

Looking to the future, organisations now need to move from words to deeds.

**First, sustainability needs to be anchored in organisations' strategies, with realistic goals, a plan and dedicated resources for implementation.**

Given the complexity of the issue, organisations need to prioritise, as they cannot fight on all fronts. Tools such as → [the Sustainability Star](#) can help to identify the relevant leverage points for a cultural organisation. It could serve as a basis for developing a common standard with sector-specific actions and indicators. This would require coordinated action and a collective commitment to a sustainability agenda.

**Transparency could also be improved. With sector-specific tools, cultural organisations could report and monitor their progress and identify potential gaps and areas for improvement in a common and coherent way.**



“We would be interested in having a tool and a common method for evaluating the environmental and social performance of our organisations. For example, to measure the environmental impact of audience mobility by show or by number of spectators. The same applies to the social dimension, such as measuring the impact of theatres that offer open price tickets. Measuring the impact of these various actions carried out by the institutions would make it possible to determine global but also individual strategies, with priorities for action, according to efficiency criteria.” -SOPHIE CORNET

Greater knowledge sharing would also be beneficial, especially for smaller institutions that may not have access to dedicated expertise. Their impact may be smaller, but they represent a significant part of the sector.

As this study shows, government requirements are important predictors of an organisation's level of sustainability.

### **Governments and sectoral associations can lead the conversation and connect relevant stakeholders.**

To do so, they need to work closely with organisations to develop appropriate programmes and incentives that capitalise on the drivers and lower the barriers to sustainability. Regular monitoring with clear targets would help governments to better understand the journey of their organisations and encourage them to move towards more ambitious goals.

Overall, the journey for cultural organisations is just beginning and they need to move quickly to make up for lost time. The trust they enjoy from large and interested audiences, and their ability to communicate messages in novel and often creative ways, make them important and unique actors in a successful transition to sustainability.

🔍 “This is a very important issue for all of us, human beings living on the earth. And as a sector, it is very important that we always remind people it's a key agenda item. So whether it's working through CIMAM [International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art] or whether it's working in my own individual institutions, or within the institutions in Hong Kong, we each have a responsibility to apply and act. And in different ways, I feel that this is now something that must be done. And we all need to advocate for that to take place.” -SUHANYA RAFFEL

# METHODOLOGY

## DATABASE CREATION AND CONTACT

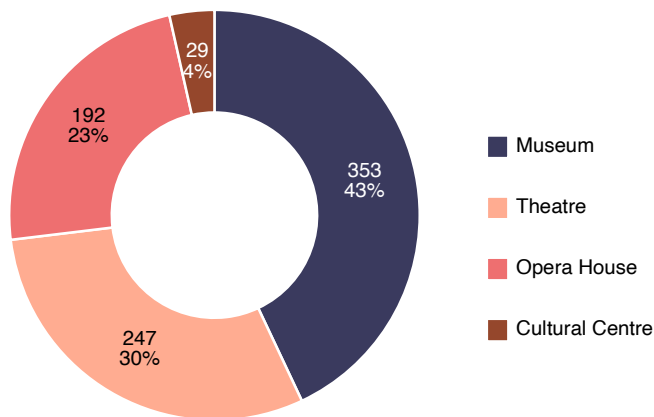
We sampled cultural organisations - museums, theatres, and opera houses - at the global level that are leading in their field, by reputation or by size.

To be considered as such, organisations had to fulfil at least one of the following criteria:

- Importance for the field:** organisations mentioned in the following corpus of expert literature: Abbate & Parker, 2015; Banham, 2004; Beranek, 2010; Brown, 1995; Holmberg and Solorzano, 2014; Liu, 2016; Newhouse, 2012; Rizoud, 2021; Rubin, 1998; Rubin, 2005; Smith, 2021; Staples, 2021; Szántó, 2020; Toyota and al., 2021; Wikipedia, 2023; Xue, 2019. (463 organisations)
- Visitor attractiveness:** organisations included in the Art Newspaper as well as AECOM reports on the most visited museums around the world. (158 further organisations)
- Membership in global associations:** all members of the following international associations:  
Union Théâtre Europe (UTE) → [<https://www.union-theatres-europe.eu/who-we-are/member-theatres>],  
European Theatre Convention → [<https://www.europeantheatre.eu>],  
Opera Europa → [<https://www.opera-europa.org/members>],  
Ópera Latinoamérica → [<https://www.operala.org/miembros/>],  
Opera America → [<https://www.operaamerica.org/membership-directory>].  
(118 further organisations)
- High cost:** organisations with a capital cost of at least US\$50 million (for organisations opened since 1991; 82 further organisations).

Based on these criteria, we collected addresses to create a database of 821 organisations. The database was composed of museums (353) as well as theatres (247), opera houses (192) and multipurpose cultural centres (29).

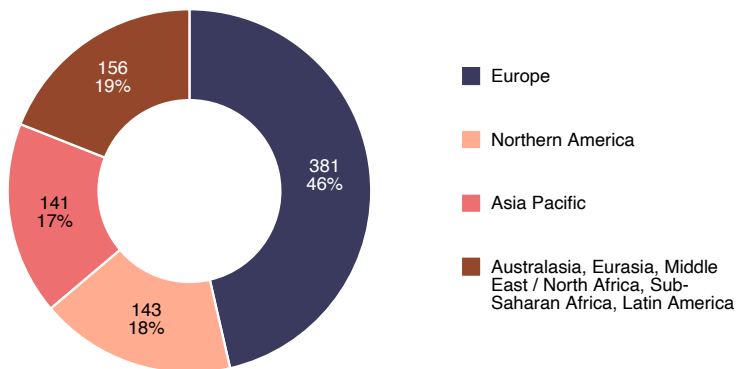
### Database: number of organisations by type



2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairoli | martin.muller@unil.ch

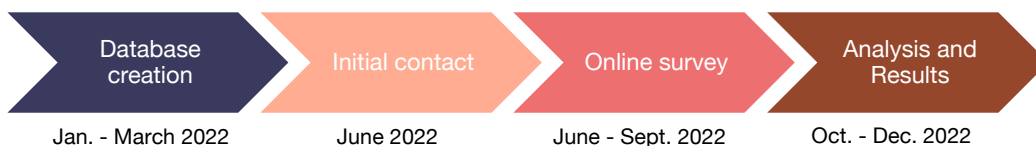
Organisations from every continent were contacted with a clear predominance of European organisations (46% of the database).

### Database: number of organisations by region



2024 | University of Lausanne | Martin Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Elia Cairoli | martin.muller@unil.ch

In June 2022, we contacted the directors of those leading cultural organisations with a letter inviting them to participate in an online survey on sustainability in the cultural sector. All organisations were guaranteed anonymity and organisations whose name is mentioned in this report agreed to this.



## CONTENT AND ANALYSIS

The survey was structured in 8 parts and took 5 to 15 minutes to fill depending on the answers:

- 1 Profile of your organisation (part 1)
- 2 Definition
- 3 Sustainability journey
- 4 Sustainability journey (Governance)
- 5 Environmental sustainability
- 6 Social sustainability
- 7 Profile (part 2)
- 8 Research project and next steps

The survey is structured around the twenty dimensions of the Sustainability Star. The process for the definition and validation of these dimensions can be found in the → [article published by ICOM Voices](#).

The pdf version of the survey is accessible at the following link: Müller, Martin, and Julie Grieshaber. 2023. “Questionnaire: Survey - Culture for the Planet.” Harvard Dataverse. → <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/NYUWP2>.

Once the data collection phase was over, we grouped the data following our scoring model and transformed scores to a scale of 0 to 100 for comprehensibility. The scoring is presented in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1:** Operationalization and scoring of the four governance dimensions of the model  
Scoring: Yes = 1 point | in the process = 0.5 point | no = 0 points

Dimension	Possible actions
Commitment	We have made an internal sustainability commitment. We have made a public sustainability commitment. We have aligned our commitment with global, national, regional sustainability goals. We have designated a resource person for sustainability.
Strategy	We have integrated sustainability into our vision and mission. We have included sustainability in our strategic plan. We have established a sustainability plan including goals. We have dedicated a budget to sustainability actions.
Implementation	We have conducted a baseline review of sustainability. We have established a governance structure for implementing our sustainability plan. We have provided dedicated training to the management and staff. We have built a monitoring system with tools and indicators for sustainability.
Transparency	We are publishing public reports of sustainability performance. We are reporting internally on actions and progress towards sustainability goals. We are maintaining a dedicated page on the website for sustainability. We are seeking external validation of our sustainability performance.



**Table 2:** Operationalization and scoring of the eight social and eight environmental dimensions of the model

Scoring: 1 point for each positive answer in each dimension:

- we have goals
- we have an action plan
- we are taking actions
- we are monitoring

Dimension	Definition
<b>Social</b>	
Learning & Inspiration	Contribution to increasing staff, visitors, and communities' knowledge on sustainability issues and providing new perspectives to achieve sustainable lifestyles
Staff Well-Being	Contribution to providing long-term, equal and safe employment opportunities for all staff, with a chance to participate in the strategic development and operational implementation of sustainability efforts
Diversity & Inclusion	Contribution of the organization to diversifying visitors and collections to reflect the experiences of people from different backgrounds
Access	Contribution to making the organization and its program open and available to diverse audiences regardless of their physical abilities or language
Community	Contribution to engaging with local communities and communities of interest through outreach programs
Urban Integration	Integration of the organization in the urban/regional fabric and contribution to environmental and social urban/regional goals
Partnerships	Participation in the exchange and creation of best practices and knowledge with partners (e.g., other cultural organizations, sponsors, community groups, NGOs, government bodies)
Integrity	Contribution to the establishment and implementation of strong ethical guidelines for accountability (for example regarding collection, origins of funding, whistleblowing)
<b>Environmental</b>	
Climate	Contribution to fighting climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions generated by the operations of the organization and adapting to possible consequences
Biodiversity	Contribution to greening landscapes and protecting/increasing biodiversity
Water	Contribution to preserving freshwater resources
Waste	Contribution to eliminating waste produced throughout the whole range of operations of the organisation with the goal of reaching a circular economy
Energy	Contribution to eliminating the use of energy with negative environmental impacts
Mobility & Transport	Contribution to achieving a responsible and low-carbon mobility of people and in the transport of equipment (e.g., objects, sets, artwork)
Food & Beverage	Contribution to a sustainable food offering (e.g., vegetarian, local, biological, certified)
Supply Chain	Contribution to implementing procurement practices of goods and services that respect high environmental and social standards

## LIMITS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

As with all research, our study is subject to several limits, the most important of which we mention below.

With no existing official database of cultural organisations worldwide, we had to create one. Only organisations with a clear programme and a dedicated space were selected, but this view can be restrictive as many artists now turn to spaces originally built for other purposes. Despite our ambition to be global, the definition of a cultural organisation remains a European concept, resulting in a large representation of this part of the world in the database. We searched for organisations in English, French and German, with some attempts in Italian and Spanish. This limits the geographical coverage of the database. There are also language barriers to participation in the survey, as all invitations and the online version were in English.

Some biases may also affect the results and representativeness. The survey focuses on what might be called input variables, such as statements, plans or actions, rather than concrete, measurable outcomes, such as indicators. An organisation could be very active in this area but not necessarily produce significant results. In addition, the self-assessment bias makes organisations more likely to overestimate their own achievements, especially for people with low expertise. Finally, organisations that are active in sustainability are more likely to have responded to our survey (self-selection bias). Taken together, these biases mean that we are likely to present an optimistic snapshot of the state of the sector.

## REFERENCES

- Abbate, C., & Parker, R. (2015). *A History of Opera* (Reprint Edition). WW Norton & Co.
- Banham, M. (2004). *A history of Theatre in Africa*. Cambridge University Press.
- Beranek, L. (2010). *Concert Halls and Opera Houses : Music, Acoustics, and Architecture* (Softcover reprint of the original 2nd ed. 2004 Edition). Springer.
- Brown, J. R. (Éd.). (2001). *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre*. Oxford University Press.
- AECOM, *Museum Index, 2012-2020 (except 2017): Top 20 museums world-wide, in North America, in Asia-Pacific, in EMEA*.
- Holmberg, A., & Solorzano, C. (2014). *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre : Volume 2 : The Americas*. Routledge.
- Liu, S. (2016). *Routledge Handbook of Asian Theatre* (1st éd.). Routledge.
- Müller, M., & Grieshaber, J. (2024). How sustainable are cultural organizations? A global benchmark. *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*.  
→ <https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2024.2312660>.
- Newhouse, V. (2012). *Site and Sound. The Architecture and Acoustics of New Opera Houses and Concert Halls*. The Monacelli Press.
- Rizoud, C. (2021). *Le Tour du Monde en 130 Opéras. Premières Loges*.
- Rubin, D. (1998). *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre, Vol. 5 : Asia / Pacific*. Routledge.
- Rubin, D. (2005). *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre Volume 4 : The Arab World*. Routledge.
- Smith, C. S. (2021). *The Art Museum in Modern Times*. Thames & Hudson Ltd.
- Staples, D. (Éd.). (2021). *Modern Theatres 1950-2020*. Routledge.
- Szántó, A. (2020). *The Future of the Museum. 28 Dialogues*. Hatje Cantz Verlag GmgH.
- The Art Newspaper, *Visitor figures, 2013-2016, 2021: Top 100 most visited museums*.

- Toyota, Y., Komoda, M., Beckmann, D., Quiquerez, M., & Bergal, E. (2021). Concert Halls by Nagata Acoustics : Thirty Years of Acoustical Design for Music Venues and Vineyard-Style Auditoria (1st ed. 2020 Edition). Springer.
- UCLG. (2004). Agenda 21 for culture. → [https://www.agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/files/documents/multi/ag21\\_en.pdf](https://www.agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/files/documents/multi/ag21_en.pdf)
- UNESCO. (1998). Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development: final report. → <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000113935>
- Wikipedia. (2023). List of national theatres. In Wikipedia. → [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List\\_of\\_national\\_theatres&oldid=1153523703](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List_of_national_theatres&oldid=1153523703)
- World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future. → <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf>
- Xue, C. Q. (Éd.). (2019). Grand Theater Urbanism : Chinese Cities in the 21st century. Springer.

# Derniers numéros

Série *Études urbaines*

**N°1 - 2018.** Un campus en mouvement. Les pratiques de mobilité des étudiant·e·s et du personnel de l'Université de Lausanne. *Gianluigi Giacomel, Antonio Martin et Patrick Rérat*

**N°2 - 2018.** Les comptages vélos dans les villes suisses. *Daniel Baehler, Dimitri Marincek et Patrick Rérat*

**N°3 - 2018.** "C'est la liberté !" Étude des cours de vélo pour adultes en Suisse. *Marie Mundler et Patrick Rérat*

**N°4 - 2019.** Quand l'écologie entre en ville / When ecology goes to town. Colloque international / International Workshop. *Joëlle Salomon Cavin et Chloé Bouvier (conception)*

**N°5 - 2020.** La pratique du vélo à assistance électrique à Lausanne. *Dimitri Marincek, Emmanuel Ravalet et Patrick Rérat*

**N°6 - 2022.** Évaluation des aménagements cyclables liés à la crise sanitaire: le cas de Lausanne. *Aurélie Schmassmann et Patrick Rérat*

**N°7 - 2022.** Le vélo en période de pandémie. Évolution des pratiques et effets des «coronapistes» à Genève et Lausanne. *Patrick Rérat, Lucas Haldimann et Hannah Widmer*

**N°8 - 2023.** Quels sont les effets d'un nouvel aménagement cyclable? L'exemple du boulevard de Pérolles à Fribourg. *Aurélie Schmassmann et Patrick Rérat*

**N°9 - 2023.** The potential of cargo bikes. Diffusion, uses, effects, and willingness for delivery. *Dimitri Marincek, Patrick Rérat, Virginie Lurkin et Emmanuel Ravalet*

**N°10 - 2023.** A Field Guide to Berlin. Designing teaching material for a field visit in urban studies. *Martin Müller, Clotilde Trivin, Nadja Imhof et Julio Paulos*

ISSN 2624-8271 (Online)

The logo of the University of Lausanne (UNIL) is a stylized, handwritten-style script of the word "Unil" in white.

UNIL | Université de Lausanne

Institut de géographie  
et durabilité