

TEH101 CONFERENCE: POLICY PROPOSAL

Cultural centres, planetary limits and how European policy can invest in habitability infrastructures

TRANS EUROPE HALLES



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1. Executive summary

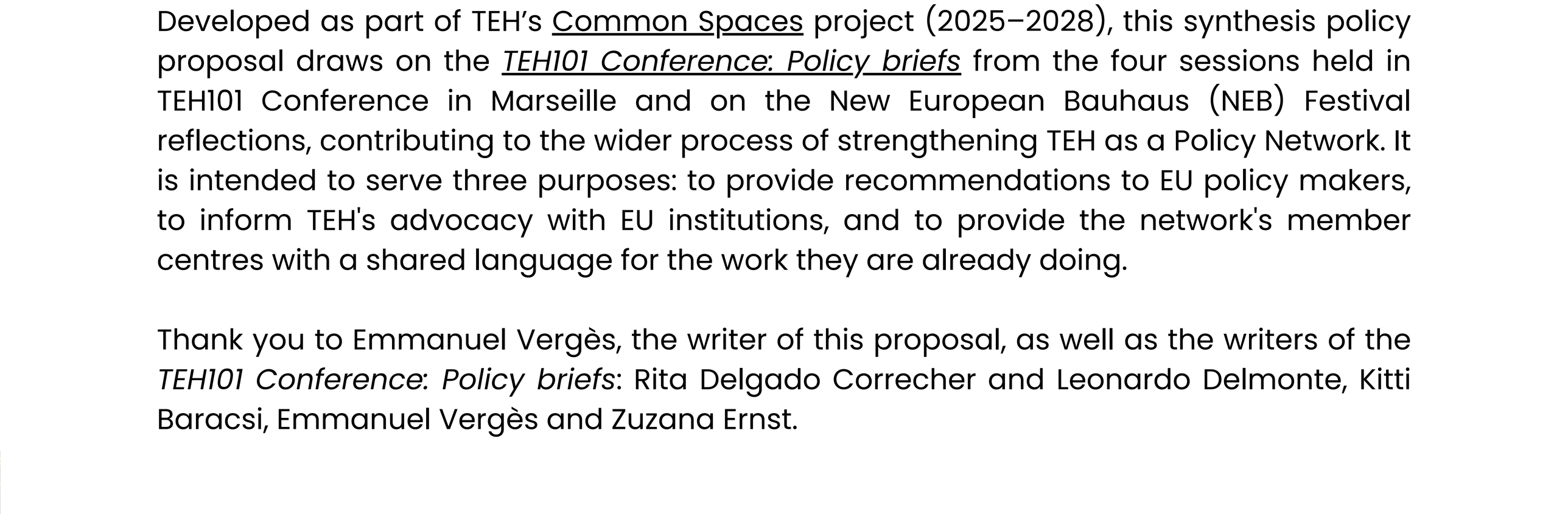
Europe is burning. Summer after summer of heatwaves and fire. Farmland dries; floods fall on burnt ground. A climate moving faster than forecast. And part of the political reflex is to blame the neighbour, the migrant, the other, close the borders and to retreat into citadels in the name of self-protection. Across the TEH network, the cultural places choose to be refuges, places that can hold shelter and friction, protection and transformation, immobility and movement. Places that, like water, take the shape of those who inhabit them while remaining whole.

This proposal, grounded in four workshops held at TEH101 Conference in Marseille, France in April 2026, identifies three structural tensions that the sector could address: the gap between scaling and growing, the performative nature of inclusion policies, and economic models misaligned with transition. It argues that what TEH member centres do – care, maintenance, listening, imagination, rootedness – is the invisible infrastructure of habitability that EU programmes currently miss.

It calls on EU policymakers to invest in a different kind of infrastructure: not only buildings, but the conditions that make collective life possible – through AgoraEU, the New European Bauhaus Facility, the Work Plan for Culture 2027–2030, and climate-adaptation frameworks. And it calls on TEH member centres to recognise, name and claim this work as the political contribution it already is.

Developed as part of TEH's Common Spaces project (2025–2028), this synthesis policy proposal draws on the *TEH101 Conference: Policy briefs* from the four sessions held in TEH101 Conference in Marseille and on the New European Bauhaus (NEB) Festival reflections, contributing to the wider process of strengthening TEH as a Policy Network. It is intended to serve three purposes: to provide recommendations to EU policy makers, to inform TEH's advocacy with EU institutions, and to provide the network's member centres with a shared language for the work they are already doing.

Thank you to Emmanuel Vergès, the writer of this proposal, as well as the writers of the *TEH101 Conference*: *Policy briefs*: Rita Delgado Correcher and Leonardo Delmonte, Kitti Baracsi, Emmanuel Vergès and Zuzana Ernst.



2. Background and rationale

Trans Europe Halles (TEH) is a European network of independent cultural centres committed to diversity, social transformation, and cultural independence. At its 101st meeting in Marseille in April 2026, hosted at La Friche Belle de Mai, TEH brought together cultural workers, scientists, artists and policymakers around a single question: how can cultural centres help communities live within planetary limits?

Four policy briefs were produced from four workshops, each addressing the question from a different angle: Living within limits — growing, not scaling (Emmanuel Vergès, l'office); Building climate nests (Rita Delgado Correcher and Leonardo Delmonte, N.E.S.T. Hub); Flood Embassy (Kitti Baracsi); and Two Beats per Minute (Zuzana Ernst). When these briefs were displayed at the NEB Festival in June 2026 in Brussels, Belgium, they prompted sustained reflection from practitioners in urban planning, design, health and community development, confirming that the argument resonates well beyond the cultural sector.

This synthesis policy proposal draws on those four briefs and on the NEB Festival reflections. It is intended to serve three purposes: to provide recommendations to EU policy makers, to inform TEH's advocacy with EU institutions, and to provide the network's member centres with a shared language for the work they are already doing.



3. Thematic content of the four sessions in TEH101 Conference

The opening panel established the conceptual frame: scaling duplicates, growing transforms — and European policy still funds the former while the transition needs the latter. Building Climate Nests grounded that frame in practice: centres as climate refuges depend on maintenance, and maintenance is a form of adaptation that no funding line currently covers. Two Beats per Minute turned the argument inward: slowing down is not inefficiency but the condition for genuine inclusion — and our institutions, including TEH member centres, reproduce the exclusions they set out to address. Flood Embassy pushed furthest: imagining an institution that represents both human and non-human interests, rehearsing governance structures that do not yet exist.

The four workshops converged on a common diagnostic analysis: the work that makes cultural centres essential – care, maintenance, listening, relation, imagination, rootedness – is invisible to the frameworks that are supposed to support them.

The four axes that structure this proposal emerge from that shared diagnostic analysis and it opens to next steps.

3.1. LOOKING PRAGMATICALLY AT WHAT WE DO

The European cultural sector — and Trans Europe Halles within it — navigates unresolved tensions that public policy has not yet learned to work on, because we miss tools and methods for that. Three structural tensions emerge that we need to address now.

The language of development is itself divided. Scale or grow, growth or degrowth, mobility or rootedness — cultural centres navigate these injunctions without European frameworks giving them tools to arbitrate. To scale is not to grow. Scaling duplicates a model while ignoring the local resources and relationships that make it work. Growing means transforming by taking root: in a territory, a community, a set of relationships that cannot be replicated elsewhere.

Inclusion policies remain often performative. Diversity is invoked in programme documents while institutions reproduce, through their rhythms and listening habits, the very exclusions they set out to address. Slowing down is not inefficiency — it is the condition for noticing who speaks easily and who struggles, whose labour of care, translation and mediation goes unseen. This is not individual failure — it is a structure.

The economic models underpinning the sector were not designed for transition. They reward measurable output and short cycles — precisely what renders invisible the work of care, maintenance and rootedness on which transition actually depends, a work that needs time. Funding buildings without funding their maintenance and their relationships with communities is funding the shell without the life inside it.



3.2. THE INVISIBLE IS THE CORE

Cultural centres already act as infrastructures of care — offering shade, water, gathering space and social connection during heatwaves and floods. But refuge depends on maintenance: keeping spaces accessible, repairing buildings, tending planted areas, sustaining relationships with neighbours. This is visible at La Friche in Marseille, in the green roofs of WUK, in Vienna, and in ecological hospitality initiatives by Pluto, in Valencia (Buildind Climate Nests, 2026). These are not exceptional interventions but everyday practices of stewardship. Care and relational work — active listening, collective description, mediation, as introduced in TEH101 as "habitability skills" (Université des Terrestres & S-composition, 2022)* — could be more visible in all European evaluation frameworks, in the programmes Creative Europe, Horizon Europe, NEB or AgoraEU, because they constitute the core of what TEH member centres do now to adapt to the climate and social crisis.

This relational work extends into imagination and beyond the human. Cultural centres are spaces of prefigurative politics, rehearsing different futures in the present. Several are already experimenting with giving voice to non-human actors — rivers, soils, ecosystems — in decision-making, echoing legal experiments in rights of nature and older indigenous understandings of the commons as a quality of relation. The future, as one voice at TEH101 put it, "is shaped by the language we are practising now. Not the language we might speak. The language we act."

All of this plays out at the first kilometre (Conseil d'État, 2023)**: the local scale at which a cultural project is not merely delivered to an audience but built with and for a territory. TEH member centres — often established in abandoned and reactivated spaces — are structural actors of this first kilometre, in cities but also in the peri-urban and rural territories that European coordination consistently overlooks. This exposes a structural contradiction: the mobility indicators of the Green Deal reward circulation and scale, while the transition they seek to enable depends on the slow, rooted, local work they do not measure.

1 **Habitability skills / compétences d'habitabilité**
A set of practical competences that enable individuals and collectives to investigate, describe, and act upon the territory they inhabit. As developed by the Université des Terrestres and S-composition, these include: active listening, collective description of dependencies (human and non-human), artistic mediation, relational and emotional competences, and the capacity to make invisible ecological realities perceptible.
Source: Université des Terrestres / S-composition

2 **First kilometre / premier kilomètre**
The local scale at which cultural action reaches its intended community – through local people, local institutions, local environments and local knowledge. Borrowed from the logistics and networks sector (where it defines the ability to deliver a service to a final recipient at a local level), the concept applied to cultural policy means that public action can no longer “descend” onto the territory but must be built from it. TEH member centres, established in specific places and communities, are structural actors of this first kilometre.
Source: Rapport du Conseil d’État (fr), 2023.

3.3. ALLYING WITH THE LIVING AND NATURE

We do not control the evolution of the world. Inspired by the whale, whose heart slows to two beats per minute in the deep, we propose slowness not as inefficiency but as a political practice: to have the energy to go deeper, to find new ways of sustaining humanity. To be like water — taking the shape of those who inhabit a space while remaining whole. The daily gestures of care that cultural centres already perform — cooking together, welcoming, cleaning, offering water — are not secondary activities: they are the discipline of approaching the world as a living system to be understood, respected and sustained.

This alliance with the living demands connecting discrimination-critical cultural work with questions of interdependence, care and more-than-human relation, drawing from Black feminist, queer, decolonial and ecological thought to move beyond extractive models of collaboration. It demands recognising that peri-urban and rural territories are under-coordinated in transition planning, and that cultural centres are already, quietly, compensating for that absence.

3.4. REFUGE AND FRICTION: BOTH, NOT EITHER

A cultural centre can be a shelter and a space of discomfort. Protection and transformation — both, at once, because the change of the living world demands is non-negotiable. Building Climate Nests proposed multifunctional spaces of refuge built in from the start, not retrofitted. Two Beats per Minute proposed staying with discomfort long enough for transformation to occur. Flood Embassy proposed rehearsing, through speculative imagination, governance structures that do not yet exist. These are not contradictory positions. A refuge that cannot hold friction is a waiting room. A space of friction without shelter is unsustainable.

"Can a pile of land be a cultural centre?" — a provocation from a NEB Festival participant, about repurposing post-flood land as cultural infrastructure — holds exactly this tension. TEH member centres already hold it, every day, largely without recognition. They are not only venues or platforms. They are living organisms that grow by taking root in a territory and a community.



4. Recommendations for EU policy makers

The recommendations are directed at three levels of EU policy makers: the European Commission agencies, the EU-level funding bodies, and the the design of the European Commission's programmes and priorities. Together, they propose a shift from culture as content production toward culture as an infrastructure for collective life which is slow, relational, and attentive to the territories it inhabits.

1

DEVELOP LONG-TERM IMPACT FRAMEWORKS WITH THE SECTOR

Invite the relevant Commission agencies to work alongside TEH and EU level partner networks in designing an impact framework rooted in lived territory and long-term horizons. Rather than measuring outputs alone, such a framework should assess the quality of collective inquiry, the continuity of care, and the transformation of local dependencies — treating time itself as an indicator, not merely a constraint to be managed.

2

SUPPORT PREFIGURATIVE AND MORE-THAN-HUMAN GOVERNANCE

Fund more cultural centres experimenting with imagination-based practices and the representation of non-human actors (Flood embassy, 2026) — soils, water, rivers, ecosystems — in cultural decision-making; a possible entry point is the implementation of national restoration plans under the Nature Restoration Law, where TEH member centres can position as active agents.



3

EMBED SLOW, RELATIONAL AND DISCRIMINATION-CRITICAL PRACTICE IN PROGRAMME DESIGN

Support longer collaborations, reflection and repair time, and listening methodologies that make inclusion structural rather than performative. Sustain hospitality and openness — to migrants, to marginalised voices, to difference — as core cultural work, not an add-on.

4

STRENGTHEN CROSS-MOVEMENT ALLIANCES AND PERI-URBAN COORDINATION

Support the cultural and creative sector in its work as a bridge between discrimination-critical cultural work and ecological transition, creating space for dialogue with feminist, decolonial and more-than-human perspectives, alongside other cross culture European networks working on similar issues. Ensure that peri-urban and rural territories — including neighbourhood countries of Europe — receive dedicated coordination in European transition planning, with DG Regio as a touchpoint alongside DG EAC.

5

INVEST IN A DIFFERENT KIND OF INFRASTRUCTURE

Support the conditions that make cultural centres infrastructures of habitability. This could take the form of a shared toolkit of habitability skills, a shared repository of otherwise invisible practices (care, ritual, hospitality, maintenance), and a short manifesto on the shift from content production to the creation of conditions for collective life, as instruments of mutual recognition and advocacy. The primary interlocutors at this level could be: DG EAC and DG Clima at European policy and decision-making level.



Contacts, credits, references and supporting resources

Policy briefs: Emmanuel Vergès (l'office), Rita Delgado Correcher and Leonardo Delmonte (N.E.S.T. Hub), Kitti Baracsi, Zuzana Ernst — TEH101, Marseille, April 2026.
Secondary: notes from the New European Bauhaus Festival.
Guided by Rita Palma and Erika Haxhi from the TEH coordination office

• Culture Compass for Europe — COM (2025) 785 final, adopted 12 November 2025
• AgoraEU proposal / successor to Creative Europe, 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework
• Preparedness Union Strategy, adopted 26 March 2025, action plan to 2028
• Nature Restoration Law — Regulation (EU) 2024/1991, National Restoration Plans due from September 2026
• New European Bauhaus Facility 2025–2027
• EU Cohesion Policy and Just Transition Fund territorial planning instruments



