



Arts Festivals Summit 2026 Budva

Smart Culture: Tapping into data intelligence and collaboration for festivals and cities

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Introduction

The session opened with a framing by [Olga Tykhonova](#) (MUSEUM BOOSTER) around the shift from isolated data collection toward collaborative data ecosystems, moving away from spreadsheets produced for reporting, and toward living infrastructures of shared intelligence that can actively support decision-making.

That shift became immediately tangible through the first pilot in focus: **Oulu Culture Foundation**, presenting its work in the lead-up to **Oulu2026 European Capital of Culture**.

Oulu: from fragmented data to practical decision-making

Presented by [Oskari Järvelin](#), Oulu's context offered a compelling starting point. Already recognised as a technology hub, the city has spent years developing tools and applications linked to city intelligence such as mobility and traffic monitoring to weather forecasting and public open-data infrastructure. Data, in other words, already exists in abundance.

As [Oulu2026](#) prepares to host thousands of events across the region during its European Capital of Culture year, operational complexity increases dramatically. Ticketing systems, bookings, venue logistics, audience movements, staffing rotas, transport patterns and security concerns all intersect.

Festival organisers know this reality well: staffing a venue is never just about filling shifts. It is a constant balancing act between visitor experience, security, accessibility, costs, and the unpredictable dynamics of a live event.

This is where Oulu's EXCENTRIC pilot enters: the prototype currently in development is a visitor flow prediction tool to be featured in the Venue Master app, an online dashboard designed to integrate multiple data sources into a single operational view. Venue schedules, staff shifts, visitor statistics and flows, alongside city APIs such as traffic and mobility data, are brought together in one place to support live operational decisions.

The ambition is not simply to observe audiences, but to anticipate movement and understanding where crowds may form, when pressure points might emerge, and where staff can be reallocated in real time.

Imagine a venue becoming unexpectedly busy due to weather changes or nearby city activity. Rather than reacting too late, organisers could intervene proactively by moving staff to entrances, strengthening security, adjusting visitor guidance, or reallocating operational resources where needed.

What made the presentation especially resonant was its honesty around complexity: understanding what data meaningfully helps operations – and what simply creates more dashboards with no real impact?

In an ideal scenario, Oskari noted, this ecosystem would extend even further: integrating tourism metrics such as hotel nights, travel patterns, arrivals and predictive visitor demand. But even with strong digital infrastructure, stitching together these layers remains technically and institutionally complex.

Still, the pilot showed clearly that data can move from abstraction to practical value when tied to real operational needs.

Sparkle cases

Lutz Henke on translating data into strategic value for visitBerlin

Building from Oulu's practical case, the conversation widened toward urban ecosystem collaboration with insights from [Lutz Henke](#), Director of Culture at [visitBerlin](#).

Henke brought a city-scale perspective grounded in long-term practice. At visitBerlin, data is embedded in a dedicated market and research team focused on collecting and analysing information across the visitor economy. Yet, importantly, the purpose of this work is not data collection itself.

Henke distilled the goals into three words: **communication. translation. education.** Meaning: data is not neutral output – it requires interpretation; it must be translated into narratives stakeholders can understand; and it must educate institutions, policymakers and the sector toward better decisions.

Henke described visitBerlin's public-private structure as a significant enabler in this work. That hybrid model provides flexibility in deploying resources and avoids some of the administrative bottlenecks that often slow experimentation in public institutions.

Yet Berlin's context is anything but simple. A city assembled from multiple districts, Berlin faces challenges of fragmentation, governance and coordination. Cultural strategy unfolds across many actors, without always having one central ministry or authority driving alignment.

One particularly striking example came from visitBerlin's long-running **culture monitoring programme**. For the past 17 years, the organisation has conducted around **7,000 interviews in museums**, gathering visitor motivations and crossing them with demographic data. The exercise generated one key insight: international visitors are essential to the sustainability of cultural venues. That finding reframes the relationship between culture and tourism as an interdependence that requires collaboration.

Henke pointed to [Amsterdam's Visitor Insight platform](#) as a useful benchmark: a multi-layered, user-friendly open-data tool bringing together accommodation data, events, mobility and first-hand visitor data from attractions. What makes that an extremely relevant inspiration for EXCENTRIC is not only its technical design, but its governance, as the project aims to build Collaborative Data Ecosystems. This means that different stakeholders access different levels of data, institutions benefit when they contribute data themselves, benchmarking becomes possible without exposing sensitive competitive information, and the tool remains adaptable to changing needs.

The takeaway was clear: technology alone is not enough. Governance models matter just as much.

Agnia Nast on how festivals create movement

If Henke brought the city lens, [Agnia Nast](#) from [Visit Estonia](#) brought the visitor journey. Her intervention reframed festivals in a particularly powerful way: festivals are not side activities of tourism, they are where the journey begins.

People increasingly travel for experiences, for stories, for emotions, and for meaning. Festivals trigger mobility and generate travel decisions, which means they affect far more than cultural participation: transport, accommodation, security, city planning, regional development, and destination branding all become entangled with them.

Yet Nast stressed an important nuance: not every festival generates the same movement. Understanding what kind of movement a festival creates matters deeply: who is travelling, why they are travelling, what visibility the event creates, what kind of experience visitors are seeking, and what the destination ultimately gains. These distinctions shape the type of data worth collecting.

Her strongest provocation landed with precision: festivals don't need more data, they need better reasons to collect it. One visitor generates countless data points as ticket scans, accommodation bookings, travel movements, food purchases, social media activity, but what happens next? Too often, nothing. Data remains locked in reports, stored in spreadsheets, and submitted for funders, rarely reused or translated into action.

Nast made a strong call for reciprocity. Festivals are frequently asked to share data upward to cities, tourism boards, and funders, but often receive little practical benefit in return. Data should create value in both directions, for city planning and destination strategy, but equally for organisers themselves. Otherwise, collection becomes extractive.

Her invitation to organisers was direct: do something with the data already in your hands.

Panel discussion: when collaboration proves harder than policy suggests

As the session opened to discussion, voices from across the room joined by experts from national festivals organisations and national cultural policy networks brought the conversation into sharper focus. The experts included Alexandra Bobes from France Festival, Natalia Oszkó-Jakab from Valley of Arts Festival & Hungarian Tourism Program Foundation, and Tereza Raabová, Cultural Economist & Strategist. What emerged was not a set of answers, but a series of tensions that felt both familiar and unresolved.

One of the most persistent challenges centred on **intangible impact**. Experts shared their ongoing work with researchers to better understand how festivals generate emotional value – how experiences of belonging, inspiration, or transformation might be captured, studied, and ultimately

recognised. It was a reminder that much of what festivals produce operates beyond the limits of traditional metrics, in spaces that resist easy quantification.

Alongside this, another tension surfaced just as clearly: **resources**.

Collaboration, shared data infrastructures, and cross-sector intelligence have become common language in cultural policy. They are present in strategies, roadmaps, and funding frameworks across Europe. And yet, as several participants pointed out, these ambitions are rarely matched with the necessary investment.

Because collaboration is not abstract.

It requires people to manage it, time to sustain it, skills to operate it, and structures to maintain it. It requires training, coordination, and long-term commitment—none of which happen by default. What the discussion revealed is that the gap is not conceptual, but practical.

A further insight resonated strongly across the room: **data alone does not change behaviour**.

Access to information, even high-quality or comprehensive, does not automatically translate into different decisions. For data to become transformative, it must be aggregated, interpreted, translated into meaning, and embedded within decision-making processes. This requires specific capacities (analytical, organisational, and strategic) that are still unevenly distributed across the sector.

As the session drew to a close, one question lingered – less as a conclusion, and more as an invitation: **What does collaboration actually mean when it comes to data?**

(This report is based on the excentric report published on the project's website: <https://excentric-project.eu/stories/inside-excentrics-open-demo-day-1-at-the-arts-festivals-summit-2026>)

Pictures





Credits

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