

CELEBRATION · EDITORIAL EDITION

Festival des Architectures Vives

Also known as Live Architecture Festival

PLACE

Montpellier, Occitanie,
France

SPACE

Distributed courtyard
network

ESSAY

Ilke Klug

EDITION

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Archive Written Abstract

Essay by Ilke Klug · 2025

The Festival des Architectures Vives (FAV) began in Montpellier, France in 2006 to provide young designers and emerging architects with a platform to showcase their experimental and ephemeral designs. The festival emerged from a partnership with the Champ Libre Association, a local organization in Montpellier that organizes community events focused on social engagement, and Montpellier-based architects Elodie Nourrigat and Jacques Brion.¹ The festival has run annually in mid-June since its origin, totaling 18 editions with unique and contextual themes over the years with a 19th to come in 2025. Themes like Sacredness, Ephemeral Curiosities, and Beauty symbolize a narrative the festival is trying to convey and others relate to broader global events. For instance, the 2024 edition was centered around a theme of Rhythm that represented the Olympic Games.

The festival takes place in the L'Ecusson District, the historical center of Montpellier, within a rotation of 24 private courtyards that are a part of the eighty Hôtel Particuliers that make up the city center. The private courtyards are open to the public and visitors alike during the duration of the festival to ignite the viewers' curiosity. Additionally, the festival aims to open a dialogue between historical architecture and contemporary installations by creating a hypothetical practice condition that is a prediction of what the discipline could come to mean.

The festival thus takes on a symbolic meaning through the ephemeral structures that reflect the evolution of architecture in an urban context and the historical context that symbolizes the strong contextual relationship to heritage. Furthermore, while the Festival des Architectures Vives promotes experimentation and public engagement, its ephemeral installations in historic courtyards raise concerns about historical tensions and disciplinary detachment, and reinforce a culture of spectacle over lasting architectural discourse.

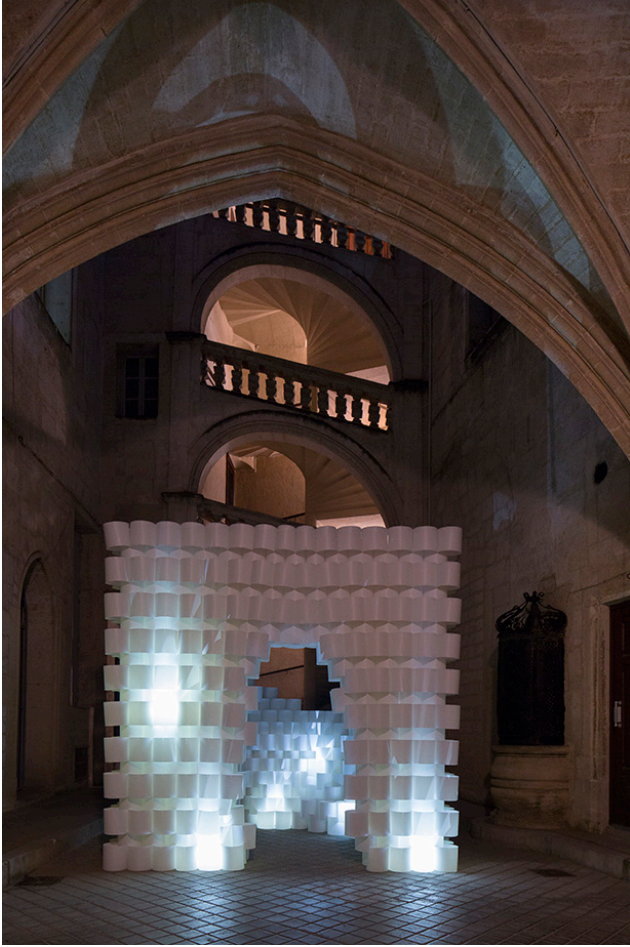
Public and Private as Spectacle

The festival was originally inspired by a Parisian festival that situated ephemeral installations in public spaces along Canal Saint Martin in Paris.² The grandeur of ephemeral public festivals in eighteenth-century France created a disconnect between the patterns of everyday life and presented an environment filled with sensory experiences.³ The FAV reflects this typology of spectacle by breaking down the borders between public and private spaces for the duration of the event and inserting the ephemeral within the network of courtyards. Over time, the festival has evolved to include a series of installations in La Grande Motte, France. Four editions have taken place in this coastal city, in 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016 respectively, in addition to the simultaneous editions in Montpellier under the same annual theme. The festival expanded to this coastal region to present a contrasting context to the historical heritage of Montpellier and broaden the scope of the festival, allowing for more diverse installations and reaching a wider audience.

The setting of La Grand Motte proposes a unique contemporary architectural heritage, particularly the work of Jean Balladur inspired by the pre-Columbian constructions of Mexico, and public spaces that give designers a larger setting for their installations. The inclusion of public spaces in the festival has led to the inspiration of other global architecture festivals like Concéntrico in Logroño, Spain, and Matjoukann Architecture Festival in Martinique, France. The use of both private and public spaces calls into question the role of the festival within the architecture discipline and how the festival is reinforcing a culture of spectacle.

The festival serves as a catalyst for the careers of young professionals as each year ten multi-disciplinary design teams and one University team, whether it be French or international, are selected by the Champ Libre Association to design the installations. The festival generates interest and engagement on a global stage by taking an international approach to design and synthesizing different disciplines and cultures. The structure of the festival is adjacent to a design competition as only a premier group of designers are selected for each edition.

The festival showcases the work of emerging architects and designers to highlight the value of experimentation and changing the narrative surrounding architecture. Historically in France, the public's interest and perception of architecture has been rather negative as their interpretation is shaped by prominent projects and work that comes at the taxpayer's expense.⁴ The festival aims to change the interpretation to simply a relationship with a space and a place. However, can the perception of the architecture discipline truly be changed through the perception and understanding of the ephemeral? The festival raises questions about the tension between conceptual installations and practical architectural applications, highlighting the risk architecture festivals have with becoming detached from real-world urban and social issues.



Paper Cloud · Studio 3A · Hôtel de Mirman · FAV 2017.

Courtyards as Heritage Interfaces

When questioning the efficacy and success of the FAV the relationship between the festival and the heritage sites of Montpellier is critical to understand. The Hôtel Particuliers (townhomes) originated in the eighteenth century and served as residences for the notability and royal bureaucracy reflecting the social structures of the time. The townhomes thus became a visible boundary between the public spaces (the streets) and the private spaces (the home).⁵ The courtyards defined the layouts of the townhomes serving as a central space and buffer between the street and private residences.

The installations constructed as part of the festival mirror this historical framework as bridging the relationship between contemporary architecture and historical sites has been at the forefront of the festival structure. Visitors of the festival experience the threshold of the courtyard and the transition to public and private spaces in an immersive way. The festival presents the courtyard as a stage for the imagination and situates visitors not only as spectators of the work but also as active participants as many installations serve as canvases for interaction and participation. This exploitation of the often forgotten and inaccessible courtyard spaces presents a historical tension and question of how the FAV respects the integrity of heritage spaces and if this intervention style is a form of adaptive reuse or aesthetic disruption.

The practice of contemporary art and design installations in heritage sites has become increasingly popular as an opportunity to extend the potential for creative practices. In light of this movement, a newfound sense of relevance and connection to heritage sites has emerged.⁶ The practice represents a form of impermanent adaptive reuse executed by the FAV. The historic district of Montpellier presents a unique urban landscape that the festival aims to preserve and promote. The festival confronts the district with new perspectives of architecture in an urban context and creates an intimate relationship between modern forms and strong historical character.⁷

Thus, the city has developed a framework for the construction of temporary installations that balances the preservation of local identity with contemporary artistic expression. Starting with the site-specific design, the installations must complement and respect the historical context of their location and aim to create a dialogue between contemporary design and historical architecture. Secondly, the installations must be time-limited displays and be reversible in a way that they can be easily removed without causing damage to the historical buildings at the end of the festival. Lastly, the use of sustainable materials is strongly encouraged.

As the demand for the architecture industry to respond and fight the global climate crisis increased, the curators of the festival have established a framework for sustainable, environmentally conscious practice. By partnering with Mas Réempli, a local building materials reuse center, the festival provides designers with an online catalog of available recycled materials and gives teams the choice of sending their materials to Mas Réempli for reuse and recovery when uninstalling their projects.⁸ As the festival evolves, the courtyards are surrounded by tangible and intangible heritage that is subject to documented narratives. The festival is used as an information strategy that shapes locals' and visitors' opinions on contemporary architecture practice. So, how does the ephemeral nature of the installations in the FAV successfully reshape public perception of historical spaces and blend the past with the present?



La tête dans les nuages · Sara de Gouy and Nelly Reviriot · Hôtel Audessan · FAV 2008.

Material Ephemerality

Through the juxtaposition of materiality incorporated throughout, the festival showcases the marriage between historical forms and innovative design. The installations of the festival primarily consist of lightweight structures that are suspended from the heavy stone walls of the courtyard with thin metal wires. Other installations are either simply laid on the cobblestone ground or constructed vertically.

The timeline for construction, five days, and the budgetary constraints, a grant of €1,500, force designers to consider a diverse material tool set. The most common materials used are fabric, paper products, metals, plastics, and glass, all of which are easily reused and repurposed after deconstruction. This ephemeral material palette contributes to a meaningful spatial dialogue between the Hôtel Particuliers which are classical architectural styles with baroque influences and the temporary installations.

In conclusion, while the Festival des Architectures Vives fosters design experimentation and public discourse about the discipline of architecture, it also raises critical concerns about historical tensions, disciplinary detachment, and material ephemerality. By inserting ephemeral installations into historically charged courtyards, the festival risks aestheticizing heritage rather than fostering meaningful dialogue with it. However, the attention to preservation and conservation through the framework of construction installations allows the ephemeral materials to showcase the heritage sites respectfully and provocatively.

The emphasis on conceptual, short-lived interventions distances architecture from its practical and societal responsibilities, reinforcing a culture of spectacle over substance. At the same time, the festival has created a unique and unmatched experience for professional endeavors and social programming to intersect.⁹

Ultimately, FAV's material juxtapositions highlight the friction between permanence and impermanence. Despite the historical, social, and material contentions, the FAV successfully creates a platform for the architecture discipline to be shaped and influenced by the innovative designs of young practitioners and reimagine the role of private spaces in an urban landscape.



Sablier · Atelier4 and SP25 Architecture · Hôtel du Palais des Guilhem · FAV 2021.

Notes

- 1 Festival des Architectures Vives. Official website. Accessed 18 December 2024.
- 2 Borne, Emmanuelle. Architectures vives = Viva Architecture! Malakoff, France: Archipress & Associés, 2022.
- 3 Bonnemaison, Sarah, and Christine Macy. Festival Architecture. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008.
- 4 Borne, Emmanuelle. Architectures vives = Viva Architecture!
- 5 Thompson, Victoria E. "The Eighteenth-Century Hôtel Particulier: Luxury, Social Status, and the Public Good." *French Historical Studies* 46, no. 4 (2023): 491–524.
- 6 Farley, Rebecca, and Venda Louise Pollock. "Contemporary Art in Heritage Practice: Mapping Its Intentions, Claims, and Complexities." *Heritage & Society* 15, no. 3 (2022): 241–258.
- 7 Plux.5. "Festival Des Architectures Vives." 13 December 2011.
- 8 Festival des Architectures Vives. Official website.
- 9 Borne, Emmanuelle. Architectures vives = Viva Architecture!

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Plux.5	Festival Des Architectures Vives	13 December 2011

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