



FROM OBSERVATION TO ACTION: HOW THE "BUILDINGS ALERT!" APP EMPOWERS COMMUNITIES

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Why endangered buildings often go unnoticed

Across European cities, the heritage that disappears most quickly is rarely the heritage that anyone formally agreed to lose. National and regional protection regimes typically cover monuments and listed buildings, those that have already been recognised, classified, and integrated into a public conservation framework. Everything outside that perimeter occupies a much greyer zone: vernacular townhouses, early-twentieth-century apartment blocks, neighbourhood-scale industrial buildings, and the smaller civic structures that give a city its texture without ever becoming postcard subjects. These buildings carry the everyday memory of European urban life, yet they fall through the cracks of formal protection precisely because they are unspectacular, undocumented, and dispersed.

The result is a recurring pattern visible from Larnaka to Marseille and from Heraklion to Valletta and Madrid: deterioration accumulates quietly over years, ownership becomes fragmented or unclear, and by the time a building enters public conversation, decisions about its future have often already been taken. The actors best placed to notice early signs of decline, such as residents, students, youth workers, the people who actually walk past these buildings every day, usually have no structured channel through which to report what they see. Civic concern exists; the infrastructure to translate it into a usable signal does not.

How citizen reporting works

The *Buildings Alert!* application, developed within the ArchTech project and documented in detail in the project's Training Module 4, was designed precisely to close this gap. Built as a no-code civic-tech tool, the application allows any user, with no technical background and no formal heritage qualification, to record an endangered or undervalued building directly from a mobile device. A single report combines a photograph, a short description, geolocation data, and a set of structured fields on the building's condition and significance; once submitted, the entry feeds into a shared, mapped dataset visible to other users and to the institutions that may eventually act on it (R2.4, *Training Module 4: How to Create a "Buildings Alert!" Mobile App*, ArchTech, 2025).

The logic of the tool is deliberately bottom-up. Rather than ask citizens to compete with experts on technical accuracy, it asks them to do what they already do well - observe, photograph, and locate - and to channel those observations into a structured format. Field testing carried out by the consortium across partner countries confirmed that this approach works in practice, but also that it works best under specific conditions: users

need a brief preparatory moment to understand what the application is for, the interface needs to be forgiving of varying levels of technical familiarity, and the most valuable reports tend to come from sessions that combine hands-on use with collective reflection on what counts as heritage in the first place. The application, in other words, is a civic instrument, not a passive form.

Benefits for local authorities and communities

The most concrete value of a tool like *Buildings Alert!* lies in what it produces over time: a structured, georeferenced, citizen-generated body of evidence on the state of the built environment that no single authority would otherwise be in a position to assemble. For local authorities and heritage offices, this means access to an early-warning signal for buildings that are not yet on any protection list but may warrant attention, as well as a documented record to support advocacy, funding applications, and dialogue with property owners. For municipalities working under tight resource constraints, which is to say, most of them, the prospect of a continuously updated, low-cost layer of observation produced by engaged citizens is not a marginal benefit but a meaningful operational gain.

For communities, the benefit operates at a different register. Field testing within the project consistently showed that documenting a building changes participants' relationship to it: a structure that was previously part of the visual background becomes, in the time it takes to fill in a report, a named and located object with a recognisable condition and a possible future. Participants, especially younger ones, reported a clear shift from passive concern to a sense of agency, and youth workers identified the methodology as directly transferable to their own activities. The application, in this sense, is not only a reporting channel; it is a tool that fosters civic familiarity with heritage as a by-product of use, building over time the kind of attentive, informed public that any serious heritage policy ultimately depends on.