

Workshop synthesis: Input for the next stages of planning and technical assessment of Universul

Workshop background and purpose

The following document summarises the main themes, observations, considerations and concerns emerging from the workshop held on 4-5 June 2026 as part of the participatory process for the future Universul Cultural Center.

The workshop was organised and facilitated by Center for Policies and Reforms (CPR) and Danish Cultural Institute (DCI) in collaboration with Innovate Moldova, following the publication of the pre-feasibility study for Universul developed by Innovate Moldova and international consultant Luka Piškorič. The study provided a starting point for discussions regarding the future role, functions, governance and development of the building.

The purpose of this document is to provide a structured overview of the perspectives, concerns and ideas collected during the workshop and to support the Ministry of Culture, the Agency for Regional Development and other relevant stakeholders in considering issues that may be relevant for the next stages of planning and technical preparation of the project.

The document should not be understood as a final set of recommendations, nor as a validated position of the cultural sector. Rather, it reflects the discussions that took place during this stage of the participatory process and seeks to document the main themes that emerged and inform the next stages of the process.

How input was collected

The observations included in this document are based on discussions and feedback collected during the two-day workshop organised on 4-5 June 2026 at Universul. The programme of the workshop included: a discussion with representative of the Ministry of Culture regarding the current stage of the project; a presentation of the pre-feasibility study conducted by Innovate Moldova and Luka Piškorič; a presentation by Caroline Spigelski, a UNOPS architect, on participatory planning, architectural development processes and procurement approaches for large-scale infrastructure projects; a facilitated workshop and group discussions focused on mapping what should be preserved in the renovation process, what the renovation should support and develop and what risks it should avoid.

The workshop brought together a total of 25-30 participants for both days, representatives of cultural organisations, independent culture initiatives, creative professionals, artists, experts and other interested stakeholders invited through an open call. It should be noted that the input collected reflects the opinions and perspectives of the people who participated in the workshop and the additional feedback collected through a feedback form. In addition, it covers only the expert input delivered by the experts presenting at the workshop.

Following the workshop, a feedback form remains open for those who wish to provide further comments or who were unable to participate directly. Additional input will be collected and will continue to inform future stages of the participatory process.

Finally, it should also be noted that some points outlined might fall outside of the scope of the Terms of Reference for the Tender, and its relevance should be assessed by the Ministry of Culture and

Agency for Regional Development when producing the next stage of documentation, like the first draft for the Tender.

Considerations emerging from the workshop discussions

The following considerations emerged from the workshop discussions held on 4-5 June 2026. They reflect themes and input that were raised and discussed by participants and experts throughout the presentations, discussions and group work sessions and additional feedback collected through the participatory process.

Process and planning

Experience in Large-Scale Rehabilitation Projects

It was suggested by the experts we consulted for the workshop on 4-5 June, to include in the terms of reference for the technical assessment a requirement that the bidding company have previous experience in large-scale rehabilitation projects (e.g. >5,000 sqm) and cultural buildings.

A Participatory Approach

It was suggested by the experts we consulted for the workshop on 4-5 June, to include in the terms of reference for the technical assessment a requirement that the bidding company have previous experience in participatory processes, and that it will involve the working groups and forum, from the participatory process, in carrying out its tasks. This could take the form of co-hosting 2–3 consultations with the cultural sector, as well as a project presentation prior to the assessment and a presentation of findings upon its finalisation.

Joint Venture

Should the tender also include a task of developing a design concept, it was suggested by the experts we consulted for the workshop on 4-5 June, to include in the Terms of Reference a requirement that this task be carried out as a joint venture, with a local firm involved in its delivery.

A Multi-Phase Renovation Process

It was suggested by workshop participants to carry out the renovation as a multi-phase process, allowing continuous usage of the space, also during the renovation. Here each floor should be thought autonomously in terms of energy and space.

Technical functionalities of the building

Energy Efficiency

Participants highlighted energy efficiency as an important issue for the future renovation, including the need to assess the building's existing electricity infrastructure, heating and cooling needs, insulation, and long-term operational costs..

Security and Fire Escapes

Participants highlighted the importance of ensuring that the spaces adhere and comply with the relevant building codes, including appropriate fire exits, evacuation routes and safety conditions for users and visitors. This was also discussed in relation to the possibility of hosting larger scale events, including events able to accommodate up to 500 persons in the Cultural Center.

Heating, Cooling and Climate Control Systems

Participants highlighted the need to consider heating, cooling and climate control systems from the early stages of planning, given the size and current condition of the building.

Cooling during summer and heating during winter were raised as important conditions for enabling year-round cultural, educational and public activities. Participants also noted that these systems should be considered together with energy efficiency and long-term operational costs.

Accessibility

Participants highlighted the need to ensure accessibility for people with disabilities and for different categories of users and visitors. Accessibility was discussed not only as a question of physical access, but also as a broader issue related to affordability, public access, inclusion of different communities, youth participation and access for cultural actors with limited resources.

Future planning should therefore consider accessibility both in technical terms and in relation to how different groups will be able to use, enter, participate in and benefit from the future center.

Architectural input

Minimal Design Interventions

Participants suggested keeping the design interventions to a minimum by preserving the facade, windows, the functional elements of the typography firm, the courtyards and preserving some of the large open spaces. Besides the aesthetic and heritage value of the building, the participants highlighted the relationship between renovation choices and the affordability of space/rent for the users. Simpler, functional and more flexible interventions were associated with the possibility of maintaining accessible rents and reducing barriers for cultural organisations, independent practitioners and non-commercial cultural activities. Finally, it was highlighted that the spaces should be flexible and adjustable, allowing future users or residents to decide themselves how to adapt or accommodate the spaces based on their needs and activities.

Avoid Over-Commercialization

Participants expressed concern that Universul could become overly commercial or inaccessible to independent cultural actors and non-commercial cultural activities. Some participants specifically mentioned the risk of transforming Universul into a model perceived as similar to ArtCor. At the same time, discussions also acknowledged that commercial and non-commercial functions may need to co-exist in order to support the long-term sustainability of the center.

The main concern raised was therefore not the presence of commercial activity as such, but the need to ensure that revenue-generating functions do not dominate the public-cultural mission of the center or exclude free, non-commercial activities and cultural actors with fewer financial resources.

Communal Space Logic

It was suggested by the participants to apply a logic of communal spaces for the center, with a common infrastructure and space established on the principles of access, social inclusion and flexibility of spaces.

Courtyard

It was suggested by the participants to remove the cars from the courtyard and prioritise pedestrians and allow for an outdoor space available to different categories of the public. In addition, it was mentioned that the whole block should be thought of in relation with the surrounding streets in the area.

Programme suggestions

Cultural Programmes

Participants discussed a broad range of cultural, educational and community-oriented functions that could be accommodated within the future center. Discussions highlighted the importance of ensuring a balance between cultural production, public-facing activities, learning opportunities and community engagement. Participants emphasised that Universul should support both the creation of culture and its presentation to audiences.

Examples mentioned during the discussions included:

- spaces for theatre, cinema and other performing arts activities;
- spaces for music, nightlife and other forms of contemporary cultural expression;
- collective studios, workshops, laboratories and workspaces for artists and cultural practitioners;
- educational activities, training programmes and opportunities for knowledge exchange;
- spaces for community activities and social interaction;
- opportunities to support local traditions, crafts and cultural practices that may be at risk of disappearing.

Participants also highlighted the importance of ensuring flexibility in how spaces are used and allowing different activities to coexist within the building. Several discussions pointed to the need to consider the relationship between commercial and non-commercial functions and how these can support the overall mission and sustainability of the center.

Management suggestions

Management Structure

Participants raised the need to clarify the future management and governance structure of Universul. Discussions included the possibility of establishing a representative board or similar mechanism, developing a shared manifesto or set of values, and ensuring equal representation of different cultural fields, users and stakeholder groups. Participants also highlighted the importance of transparency, accountability and mechanisms to prevent conflicts of interest, politicisation or domination of the space by a limited number of actors. The discussions did not lead to a single preferred management model. Rather, they highlighted the need to further explore governance options that can balance public support, institutional accountability, cultural autonomy, independent and long-term sustainability.

Renting Periods

Participants highlighted the importance of considering longer-term renting contracts and access arrangements for persons and organisations from the cultural sector, especially where continuity is needed for cultural production, studios, workshops or other long-term activities.

Existing Spaces and Residents

Participants raised the need to clarify the future role of current users, residents and existing activities within Universul. Discussions highlighted the importance of avoiding displacement without a clear

transition plan and of identifying sustainable solutions for the spaces and communities that already exist in or around the building. This issue was linked to broader questions regarding continuity of cultural activity, future access to spaces and the relationship between existing users and the future development of the center.

Role of the Ministry of Culture

Throughout the discussions, participants repeatedly raised questions regarding the current and future role of the Ministry of Culture in relation to Universul. Participants highlighted the importance of clarifying the future relationship between the Ministry, the management structure of Universul, the future center and future users of the space. Discussions touched on questions of governance, autonomy, accountability and long-term support mechanisms. Several participants emphasised the importance of ensuring sufficient independence for the future center while maintaining an appropriate level of public support and institutional involvement. Questions were also raised regarding how responsibilities would be divided between the Ministry, future management structures and other stakeholders.

The discussions demonstrated that further clarification of institutional roles and governance arrangements will be important in future stages of the process.

Annexes:

- A1: Meeting minutes, 4 June 2026
- A2: Meeting minutes, 5 June 2026