

Opengela: your neighbourhood regeneration hub

BIRTUOSS PROJECT
LAYMAN'S REPORT

INTRODUCTION

A model that scales from the building to the neighbourhood

The refurbishment of buildings is a complex process for citizens, and even more so if it is undertaken in highly vulnerable neighbourhoods. The LIFE BIRTUOSS project was created to facilitate this process by setting up neighbourhood offices, known as 'opengelas' ('open' and 'gela' = 'room', 'office' in Basque). In addition to supporting the neighbourhood throughout the process, the project has consolidated the model and replicated it: from two pilot projects to twenty-five offices in twenty-eight neighbourhoods in the Basque Country. And it has changed the outlook by going beyond the building scale to transform the neighbourhood as a whole, with clear social, urban, environmental and governance benefits.

On the right, some of the 'opengela' offices set up in recent years in the Basque Country.



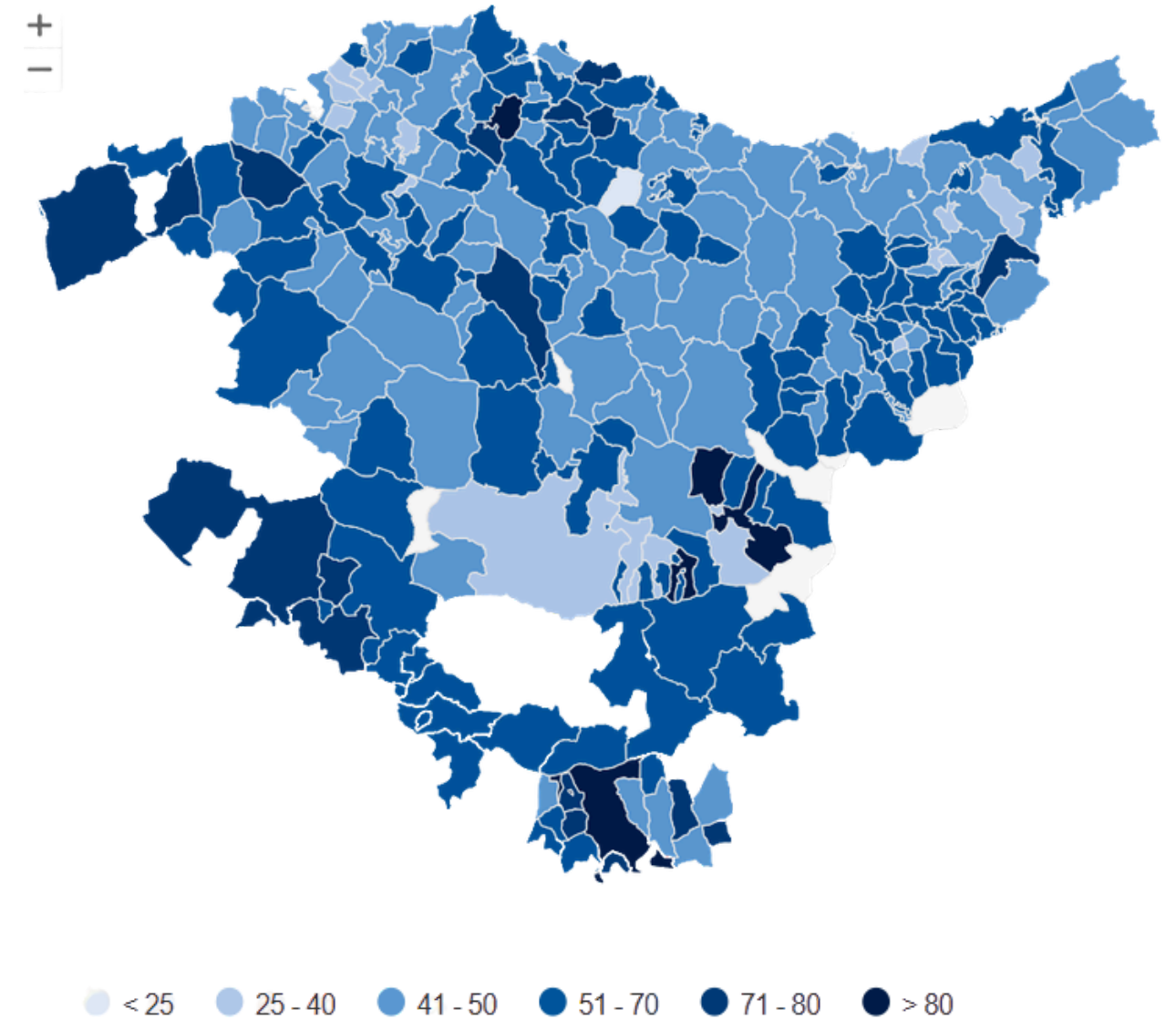
Starting point: an ageing residential complex

In the Basque Country, most homes were built more than 40 years ago. **Almost 70% of residential buildings were built before 1980**, when the criteria for energy efficiency, accessibility and comfort were very different from today. As a result, many homes have insufficient insulation, high energy consumption and accessibility barriers that make daily life difficult for their residents.

It is estimated that **around 300,000 homes were in need of urgent refurbishment**, a situation that was particularly evident in neighbourhoods with higher levels of social and economic vulnerability. At the same time, about **9% of the Basque population was in a situation of or at risk of energy poverty**, which makes it difficult to maintain adequate conditions of comfort in the home.

This challenge is particularly important in a region with a high dependence on external energy and with ambitious targets to reduce energy consumption and emissions associated with buildings. However, renovating a property is often a complex process for homeowners' associations, which have to make technical, administrative and financial decisions.

**Almost 70 % of residential
buildings in the Basque Country
were built before 1980**



Map showing the average age of dwellings in the Basque Country by municipality (2024), taken from the Basque Autonomous Community's Urban Vulnerability Inventory.

Faced with this reality, the **Opengela** programme was created, accompanied by the work of an initial project called HIROSS4all (funded by Horizon 2020). **BIRTUOSS** was created in 2023 with the aim of strengthening and expanding this urban regeneration model, based on a network of neighbourhood offices that support the residents, communities and authorities.

BIRTUOSS project (Opengela)

BIRTUOSS has demonstrated the effectiveness of tackling housing renovation on a neighbourhood scale. Instead of acting building by building, the project opted for a coordinated intervention on entire residential complexes, combining energy improvements, accessibility, social support and citizen participation. This approach makes it possible to make better use of public resources and reach more people. And the local office tool is essential.

The project also launched a living lab in the **TorreUrizar** residential complex, in the Irala district of Bilbao, where real solutions were tested and validated together with the residents themselves. Improving the energy efficiency of buildings, installing lifts, renovating outdoor spaces and monitoring the comfort of homes made it possible to verify the benefits of comprehensive urban regeneration on the ground.

At the same time, during the project, the Opengela network went from the first two pilot experiences to having **25 neighbourhood offices spread across 28 districts in the Basque Country**, creating a stable structure of collaboration between the Basque Government, town councils and specialised entities. In this way, the project laid the foundations for a new way of approaching large-scale urban regeneration.

25

neighbourhood
offices

28

neighbourhoods in
the Basque Country

84%

neighbourhood
engagement

175,98

million euros of
investment

4.888

people benefited



MAIN OUTCOMES

Aerial view of the Goikolarra neighbourhood in Amurrio (Álava), in the final stages of its urban regeneration process.

A network that is transforming neighbourhoods across the Basque Country

One of BIRTUOSS's greatest achievements has been to make the Opengela model a reality across the whole of the Basque Country. What began with initial pilot schemes in Bilbao and Eibar, followed by Durango and Lasarte-Oria, has evolved into a network of 25 offices operating in 28 neighbourhoods across the Basque Country, bringing urban regeneration closer to the public and supporting local communities throughout the renovation process.

The offices are located in neighbourhoods with very different characteristics, but they share the same mission: to facilitate energy-efficiency refurbishment, improve the accessibility of homes and help build more inclusive, sustainable and resilient urban environments.

The expansion of the network has had a tangible impact. During the project, €175.98 million was invested in neighbourhood regeneration and building refurbishment (€155.68 million from public sources and €20.30 million from private funds), directly benefiting 4,888 people and achieving an estimated energy saving of 25,480 MWh per year, thereby preventing the emission of 4,924 tonnes of CO₂ annually. At least 38 direct jobs were also created during the project.

Furthermore, the model achieved a high level of community involvement, with an average participation rate of 84% in the refurbishment processes initiated by the offices.

'Customised' offices: seven models for different situations

There are no two neighbourhoods alike. Some have a long history of community work, whilst others are taking their first steps. Some local authorities have teams specialising in urban regeneration, whilst others need more technical support. Neighbourhoods also vary in size, the number of homes, levels of social vulnerability and the condition of their buildings.

Consequently, one of the most significant outcomes of BIRTUOSS has been the identification and definition of **seven governance models for the Opengela offices**, tailored to different local contexts. Rather than applying a one-size-fits-all solution, the project has demonstrated that urban regeneration works best when the organisation of the office is tailored to the specific needs of each neighbourhood.

All the models share the same philosophy: collaboration between public authorities, specialised technical support and close engagement with the public. However, the distribution of responsibilities may vary. In some cases, leadership lies primarily with the local council; in others, organisations specialising in urban regeneration take on the day-to-day coordination of the office.

This flexible approach has made it possible to extend the Opengela network throughout the Basque Country without compromising its effectiveness, ensuring that each neighbourhood has the most appropriate structure to drive its transformation process. Experience shows that governance is not a secondary consideration: it is one of the key factors in ensuring that regeneration truly reaches people and is sustained over time.



Pasaia Opengela



What has changed for the local community?



More comfortable homes

Better thermal insulation and more stable indoor temperatures.



Better accessibility

Installation of lifts and removal of architectural barriers.



More sustainable neighbourhoods

Lower energy consumption and fewer CO₂ emissions = neighbourhoods more resilient to climate change.



Close support

Neighbourhood offices that provide support throughout the refurbishment process.



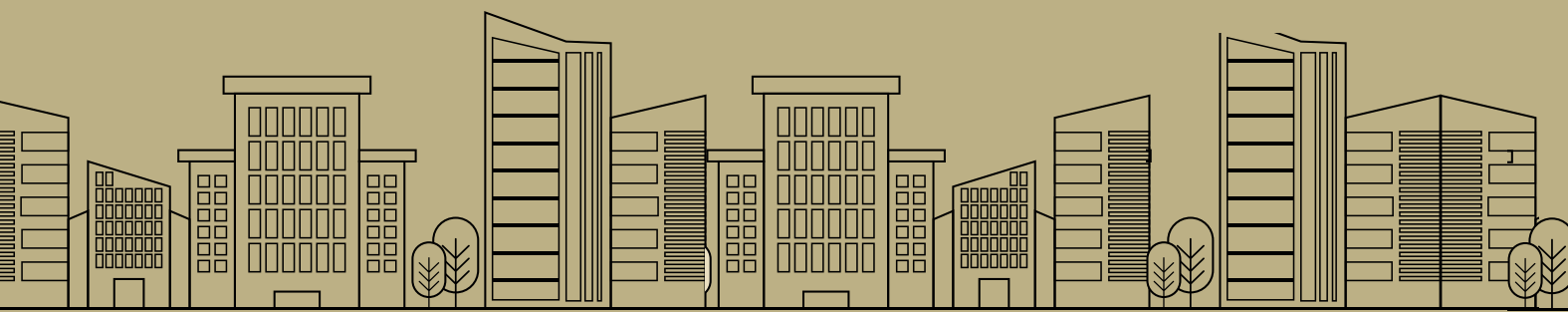
Renovated public spaces

More green spaces, accessibility and urban quality.



Greater community participation

Local residents have a say in decisions about their neighbourhood.



The development of new tools

One of BIRTUOSS's most significant legacies is the creation of new tools to help plan, manage and accelerate urban regeneration. The aim has been to transform the experience gained by the Opengela network into practical tools that can continue to be used in the future.

The main one is **Opengela Roadmap**, a planning tool that provides an overview of the housing stock in the Basque Country and helps to identify which buildings and neighbourhoods require urgent action, where the greatest benefits can be achieved, and how to prioritise public and private investment. Thanks to this tool, public authorities can devise long-term regeneration strategies.

BIRTUOSS has also launched the '**Building Passport**', a personalised document that enables homeowners' associations to plan the refurbishment of their properties step by step. Rather than tackling all the work in one go, the passport sets out a phased roadmap for improving energy efficiency, reducing emissions and making better use of the available grants.

Added to this are the **standardised protocols for documentation, management and monitoring**, developed for all Opengela offices. These procedures facilitate the work of the technical teams, improve coordination between local authorities and ensure that residents receive a consistent, high-quality service, regardless of the neighbourhood in which they live.



Opengela Roadmap: Strategic planning for the regeneration of the Basque housing stock.

Building Passport: A customised roadmap for every owners' association.

Standard protocols: Shared processes and documentation for all offices within the network.

A shared objective: To facilitate and accelerate long-term urban regeneration.

The most important thing: local community participation

The Opengela model puts people at the heart of the process. That is why all regeneration processes have involved the direct participation of local residents. They have been involved in decision-making not only regarding their buildings, but also regarding public spaces, accessibility, green spaces and other aspects that directly influence the neighbourhood's quality of life.

Measurable outcomes

Citizen participation had a direct impact on the results achieved. In TorreUrizar, **4,789 personalised consultations, 2,078 information sessions and 21 working and decision-making meetings** with the local community took place.

The measures also improved the comfort of the homes. The average indoor temperature during the winter months rose **from 18.8 °C to 20.4 °C**, resulting in more comfortable and energy-efficient homes.

Citizens' feedback was equally positive: the service provided by the Opengela office in TorreUrizar achieved an **81% overall satisfaction** rating, a figure that rises to **84%** for aspects relating to the support and assistance provided.

TorreUrizar: a living urban research lab

The best example of this approach is **TorreUrizar**, a residential complex comprising **25 buildings and 264 homes**, which became the project's living lab. Here, solutions were designed, discussed and validated in collaboration with local residents through meetings, working groups and neighbourhood assemblies.

This process led to specific improvements such as the installation of lifts and the removal of architectural barriers, the energy-efficient refurbishment of buildings through thermal insulation, the installation of solar panels on rooftops, and the renaturalisation of squares and outdoor spaces using nature-based solutions. In addition, the communal areas and the environmental quality of the surroundings were improved.

264 homes in the TorreUrizar living lab, 4,789 enquiries handled and an 84% satisfaction rate amongst local residents with the service provided

Pictures of the TorreUrizar housing complex. On the right, the neighbourhood office during a visit and a neighbourhood meeting.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The BIRTUOSS experience shows that urban regeneration works best when approached at neighbourhood level, through a combination of technical support, public participation and collaboration between public authorities. Based on the results obtained, the project puts forward a number of recommendations to continue driving urban regeneration forward.

» Consolidating neighbourhood offices

Neighbourhood offices have proved to be an effective tool for supporting the public during regeneration processes. They should be rolled out gradually, with multidisciplinary teams tailored to the needs of each area and with stable coordination between local and regional authorities.

» Maintaining a flexible model

There are no two neighbourhoods that are exactly the same. For this reason, urban regeneration processes must combine common elements with the flexibility needed to adapt to the social, urban and economic characteristics of each area.

» Strengthening coordination and shared learning

Collaboration between public authorities and specialist organisations is one of the keys to the model's success. Sharing tools, experiences and best practice enables resources to be optimised and results to be improved.

» Promoting the model in Spain and across Europe

BIRTUOSS recommends consolidating neighbourhood offices as a permanent tool for accelerating energy-efficient refurbishment and urban regeneration. To this end, stable regulatory and financial frameworks are required, and European networks for the exchange of knowledge and the replication of good practices must be strengthened.

The main lesson is clear: building refurbishment achieves better results when it is people-centred, tailored to each neighbourhood and underpinned by sound, collaborative governance.



Members of the BIRTUOSS project consortium at the closing event in Alcalá de Henares (Madrid)



A square in TorreUrizar during the initial phase of the urban regeneration process.

SHARING THE EXPERIENCE

A model that originated in the Basque Country and has spread across Europe

The dissemination of the results has been an essential part of BIRTUOSS. Communication was carried out via Opengela's website and social media, information materials, visits to neighbourhoods, technical seminars and participation in national and international conferences. Thanks to these initiatives, the model has reached far beyond the neighbourhoods in which it has been implemented.

The BIRTUOSS project was also presented at leading European forums such as EUSEW, EPAH, Housing Europe, ManagEnergy and EU Peers, contributing to the debate on how to accelerate energy-efficient refurbishment and urban regeneration in Europe.

BIRTUOSS's reach in figures

19.507
web users

87.541
page views

+950
followers on
LinkedIn

10
newsletters
sent

70
events, conferences
and seminars

112
media
appearances



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