Adaptive heritage reuse
Learning from policy and governance frameworks across Europe

In this Policy Brief, we present recommendations for policy makers, heritage officers, and planners, at national and sub-national levels of government. These recommendations aim to support the implementation of adaptive heritage reuse projects. The recommendations are based on our work in the OpenHeritage project and in particular our reports on policy and the governance dialogue.[1]

Adaptive heritage reuse is becoming more and more common as a way to care for heritage assets, and a sustainable way of recycling their material aspects, whilst also engaging with their immaterial, narrative, and emotive qualities. Our analysis of heritage and planning systems across Europe, identifies how adaptive heritage reuse projects can be facilitated or frustrated by regulatory systems. We have also identified relevant policies and tools that support adaptive heritage reuse. We hope to inspire change in favour of adaptive heritage reuse and help develop more sustainable governance models for heritage reuse in Europe.

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1 Reports: *Mapping of Current Heritage Re-use Policies and Regulations in Europe*; and *Typology of current adaptive reuse policies*, both can be downloaded here: www.openheritage.eu/resources and the dialogues: www.openheritage.eu/openheritage-dialogues

What is adaptive heritage reuse?

When buildings lose their primary use, one of the ways to save them from falling into ruin or being torn down is to reuse them, through adaptive reuse. Although reuse of buildings and sites brings many benefits, it also creates challenges, and both are highlighted in this policy brief.

In OpenHeritage we argue that reusing buildings, sites, ruins, and materials should be considered as a more sustainable alternative to the wasteful process of demolition. But we should not forget that these assets are not just materials, buildings, or sites. They bring about different (positive and negative) stories, meanings, and feelings for people. They are often significant for local communities, through their histories as well as their potential.

Heritage, especially when formally listed, is often seen as a challenge in the spatial planning context. Adaptive heritage reuse as a practice, is often promoted as a way of making heritage a catalyst for development. This approach can be very successful in recycling buildings and materials, in keeping those elements that are important to the local community, and creating or stimulating property markets to thrive. Adaptive heritage reuse can, however, also easily facilitate gentrification processes, commodification, and the exclusion of groups of people.

It is vital to understand the context in adaptive reuse: why it is done, and what it is for? In some countries adaptive reuse is positioned as a tool for urban regeneration, usually with a focus on deprived areas. In other countries reuse is much more directly related to solving vacancy, restricting urban sprawl, or facilitating the creation of more direct links between local communities and their heritage. Reuse, especially temporary reuse, is also used to explore the potential of the building or site (or to protest its pending demolition) in different ways, and by different actors, such as activists, a government, or by creative practitioners in need of affordable work space.

The OpenHeritage Project

OpenHeritage is developing inclusive governance and management models for overlooked heritage sites using its six Living Labs and its study of good practices of adaptive heritage reuse implemented across Europe (Observatory Cases). Working together with residents, local businesses, higher education organisations, and municipalities, OpenHeritage explores diverse partnership arrangements, community engagement methods and finance mechanisms to help develop and sustain engaged communities around heritage sites. In the Labs, the project further explores how community empowerment could be realised in the processes of adaptive reuse, whether that is through policy change, local activities (both online and offline), increased attention from civic actors, or all of the above.

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General Trends across Europe

Adaptive heritage reuse...

... helps to maintain and protect historic buildings and sites when done well.

... is widely used as a tool for urban regeneration, solving vacancy, restricting urban sprawl, and creating more direct links between heritage and communities.

... can be a way to connect with local communities, when it is used to celebrate and respect their pasts, and work with their experiences, stories, and thus heritage.

... is seen as a catalyst for local development, through creating regional and local identities, which fits within a broader shift towards defining heritage as a resource for development, engagement, branding, and tourism.

... is becoming more popular as a sustainable way to care for heritage, and is emerging as an important policy aim in several national policy frameworks and in EU governance. Especially in the post-2008 financial crisis context, it is promoted as a tool for economic recovery.

... is emerging in other policy domains: e.g. energy-saving, crisis recovery, economic development, tourism, participation, culture and youth policies and (funding) programmes.

... in some circumstances can be part of an act of protest, to claim space, prevent demolition or to highlight the value of local assets. The value of this work is not always facilitated or appreciated by more formalised actors.

Challenges in the planning and heritage policy context

Adaptive Heritage Reuse...

... can be hindered by inflexible heritage legislation and strict protection. Adaptive heritage reuse is more common and easier in countries where heritage protection is flexible (that is not to mean weak!). These countries tend to define heritage as something to care for, rather than something to protect from harm. Inflexible heritage legislation and strict protection, however, can also be the only reason a heritage asset survives.

... suffers from complexity and contradictions within many planning and heritage systems, with unclear and/or overlapping responsibilities and plans, and systems that are overly bureaucratic, difficult to navigate, and not designed to support adaptive reuse processes.

... is often *not* explicitly mentioned in policy. Terminology varies a lot across countries, and the practice of adaptive reuse falls under more general terms such as regeneration, rehabilitation, restoration or conservation. This can mean challenges, procedures, expertise and responsibility are not made specific, and e.g. focus on protection rather than adaptive reuse.

... can be subject to long, complex, and slow 'permit' processes, needing approvals from building, planning, and heritage departments. This is often a combination of under-resourcing and understaffing, unintegrated procedures and policies, and key decisions being taken on different levels, and /or by different organisations.

... tends to be more difficult when decision-makers don't have authority or discretion to deviate from a general set of standards, which are often developed with new construction in mind.

... may also have barriers that are related to financial risks such as unpredictable or complex bureaucratic processes. A (lack of) ownership, political support, financial investment can make is risky to undertake projects, even for local communities and 3rd sector organisations not aiming for profits.

... is often complicated by fiscal, funding, and procurement structures, that privilege either new construction *or* heritage, not a combination, or make temporary reuse, ownership, or material recycling difficult.

... doesn't always benefit from heritage funding and tax reliefs, which can be curtailed for protection and preservation of (sometimes only publicly owned) formal and material heritage assets and not for their use or reuse.

... can be very rewarding but also challenging for more bottom up initiatives. Often there is a lack of financial and practical support for such initiatives, and it can be complicated and expensive to navigate planning, heritage, and building regulation and procedures.

... can easily be part of stimulating gentrification and commodification. This is problematic and leads to displacement and exclusion, as well as to a loss of a variety of stories around heritage in a multi-vocal way.

Key themes in adaptive heritage reuse across European countries

It helps to have integrated heritage and planning policies, good communication between the different levels of governance, and to be open to creative ways to use heritage for wider policy aims such as sustainability or regeneration. The potential for heritage to assist in achieving other policy goals has been an increasing focus for policymakers in recent decades. This extends across a wide range of policies dealing with place, including, for example, environmental sustainability, participation, culture, health and well-being, and socio-economic development. Adaptive heritage reuse lies at the intersection of such considerations, occupying a position where the past and the future are mediated; heritage is sustained but given new purpose as part of an ongoing social, economic, environmental and cultural transformation. A national or regional vision that explicitly supports reuse, as a tool for regeneration, waste reduction, sustainable development, or reducing sprawl, is valuable in this, too.

Flexibility can be created by decentralising systems, and devolving decision making-power to the local level. Flexibility and discretion, especially on the local level, as well as integrated decision-making processes are key. Discretion at local level creates risks (they can decide to say no, or be unfair) but is often seen as helpful, as it opens up space where change can be negotiated and significance determined. Approaches to change can be flexible, even when heritage regulations in principle are strict. This is helped by a focus on caring for heritage and people bringing heritage back into use, and by policies and programmes that integrate and stimulate reuse for other wider local aims, e.g. housing, sustainability, culture, or tourism.

Contextual factors can be important, e.g. fees, tender criteria, procurement regulations, tax, funding criteria, zoning plan restrictions, and building codes are often not geared towards facilitating adaptive reuse. Aligning building codes and funding regulations with reuse aims may be obvious suggestions. But also revisiting tender and funding criteria, tax and value added tax (vat) regulations, zoning and temporary use regulations, and procurement policies can lead to a much more adaptive-reuse oriented context.

Even when the current policy environment is not supportive, adaptive heritage reuse is still possible. For example, adaptive reuse can be supported through anti-speculative financing and funding, EU projects, collaborative ownership models, partnership working, informal and activist approaches, and education and training projects.

The EU and Adaptive Heritage Reuse

Especially since the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018 (EYCH), adaptive heritage reuse is becoming more prominent in agendas on heritage and culture. It is also emerging in agendas on economic (growth), urban and regional development, the quality of the built environment and architecture, as well as those one greening and circular economies, material sustainability, recycling, and waste reduction. The potential influence of EU funding on Adaptive Heritage Reuse as a practice is very high, and could benefit a from even more explicit stimulance through urban regeneration and reuse projects, e.g. European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, and the Regional Development Fund, which (co-) funds relevant programmes such as Interreg, Urban Innovative Action, Leader, Urbact, and Creative Europe.

Recommendations

Ways to create more supportive policy environments

Approach adaptive heritage reuse as a sustainable way forward:
Consider adaptive heritage reuse both as a way of recycling material and a way of finding histories and stories. When done sensitively, it is a way to care for heritage, which should focus on the people, the use and the material.

Collaborate within government:
Adaptive reuse tends to be easier when 1) key decisions are taken on the same level of government, and 2) there is trust and collaboration between the involved planning, (economic) development, and heritage departments.

Facilitate a tailored approach:
Adaptive heritage reuse benefits from a tailored approach and can thus also benefit from local level discretion, and the 'space' to make exceptions. This is, of course, different from using deregulation, austerity measures, or corruption to create these 'grey zones'.

Be creative when it comes to the many different and potentially relevant programmes: Adaptive heritage reuse combines many facets and fields and operates within a variety of funding and policy programmes (e.g. energy, social, growth, recycling). Information on, and the integration of the knowledge and structures of different programmes, can increase the willingness to support adaptive reuse through non-heritage routes.

Focus your resources:
It helps to focus and combine resources for promoting adaptive reuse in specific areas (e.g. high streets), or thematically (e.g. industrial heritage), or in specific sectors (e.g. heritage-led tourism, sustainable development). Sustainable development policies for example, can create a 'market' for reuse, e.g. by restricting sprawl or by focusing on more

efficient use of existing resources, recycling, and waste management.

Develop adaptive re-use specific and clear guidance:
The process of adaptive reuse can be de-risked through clearer regulator frameworks; making the building and permit processes less unpredictable and uncertain; and through clear guidance. To enable non-standard solutions for listed buildings, facilitate the creative solving of issues related to energy efficiency, health, fire safety, and the new use.

Revisit procurement, fiscal, funding, and tender criteria: Procedural aspects and requirements to participate in public tenders or to initiate projects can be counterproductive for actors who try to be innovative and risk-taking in adaptive heritage reuse. Such requirements can be fees for pre-application discussions, costly guarantees, or tenders based on principles of 'low expenditure' or 'construction efficiency'. Thus, there is a need for revisiting public tender processes, procurement, funding, tax, and evaluation (success) criteria.

Create a framework for temporary heritage reuse: Meanwhile use can help make projects more viable, but they can also exacerbate gentrification and speculation. Temporary (change of) use needs to be proportional to property taxes, business rates, and other use-based levies.

Be mindful not to facilitate gentrification and commodification: It is important to have mechanisms for dealing with reluctant owners who refuse to maintain buildings. At the same time, it is also important to have financial and legal tools that can facilitate handing over ownership to non-commercial or commons initiatives (e.g. cooperatives, community trusts), and limit possibilities for speculation.

Recommendations

Mechanisms and practices to facilitate actors undertaking adaptive reuse projects

Facilitate sharing knowledge: It is important to share practices, knowledge, and experiences, for example by setting up peer-to-peer networks, peer-learning schemes, and finding ways to showcase example projects.

Map vacant and dilapidated heritage assets: Mapping these assets is a start for further thinking about urban regeneration. This can help set priority reuse actions for certain areas and assets.

Have designated 'matchmakers' with knowledge of vacancy in the locality: Matchmakers can help match vacant heritage assets and potential users.

Support local groups and third sector organisations to take on adaptive reuse projects: There are various effective ways to support bottom-up processes, e.g. giving them access to process mentors, and experts, providing free, early and continuing advice on how to navigate bureaucratic procedures, and to work around high procedural fees, especially for community-led 'one-off' projects.

Support or develop innovative pilot projects with publicly owned heritage: Public ownership can be an opportunity to test and showcase new and innovative approaches, to the intervention, the regulation, or the collaboration, e.g. exploring new partnership models.

Be creative and flexible when it comes to funding and financing: Projects can be facilitated by financial mechanisms, such as providing low rent and longer lease options, rent and facilities 'package deals', or shared facilities.

Be supportive to community-led adaptive heritage reuse: You can give communities the means to take charge, e.g. through commons, cooperative, crowdfunding, community shares, community land trust models, but also through trust, advice, and support, or allowing activists' interventions.

Actively work with communities: Local people should not be excluded, they can be involved through stories, memories, skills, and job opportunities. Local people often are passionate about their neighbourhoods - work with them, learn from them, but also protect them from displacement and complex bureaucratic processes.

Be mindful how you 'use' communities: Are communities just there to pave the way? Where will they go after this process and is this fair?

Stimulate the provision of education and training: Universities and colleges as well as accrediting bodies, heritage knowledge centres, and larger third sector players in urban development such as housing associations, can organise everything from training days, workshops, and research projects, to programmes that offer specific or additional certification or accreditation.

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The highlighted countries are analysed in the OpenHeritage Reports mentioned on page 1