OPEN
HERITAGE

A roadmap for the EU and Europe
Integrating adaptive heritage reuse in wider EU policies, programmes and practices.

In this Policy Brief, we present recommendations for the wide range of experts within the EU who are in some way, directly or indirectly, engaged in facilitating Adaptive Heritage Reuse (AHR) policies, programmes and practices. By this we mean heritage experts, but also those in urban renewal, regional development, rural development, climate justice, sustainability, greening economies, research and innovation, entrepreneurship, social justice, social economy, housing, wellbeing, tourism, and culture, design and creative industries. And, while we mainly focus on EU institutions, this Policy Brief is also relevant for those involved in projects that could benefit from the EU. AHR, and especially the locally-led, bottom-up AHR in marginalised places that the OpenHeritage project focusses on, is often a very localised practice. As such participants may seem and feel far removed from the direct sphere the EU operates in and vice versa. We will provide an overview of the issues at play and make recommendations to address this, and to further facilitate the implementation of these local AHR projects across Europe. The recommendations are based on research within OpenHeritage (EU H2020)[1] and are in line with the 2021-2027 priorities of EU's Cohesion Policy.[2]

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[1] This policy brief is based on OpenHeritage Deliverable 3.8. OpenHeritage's Observatory Cases can be found on the OpenHeritage website. The interactive OpenHeritage Database includes further information on each Observatory Case. Work in the Labs can be followed at their individual pages.

Adaptive Heritage Reuse and the EU

AHR projects are about the past, the present and the future, where tangible and intangible heritage from the past that is valued now is sustained for the future while simultaneously given new purpose as part of ongoing social, economic, environmental and cultural transformation. As such, AHR can be a tool that contributes to achieving, for example, community engagement, higher quality of life regeneration, waste reduction, and/or emissions reduction. Reuse and renovation are already integrated to a certain extent within the European Green Deal,[3] and the New European Bauhaus.[4] We recommend that for this to be truly effective AHR, and in particular AHR that is locally-led, should be facilitated by, incentivised by and integrated in a much wider set of EU policies and strategies including, but not limited to, current Recovery and Resilience Facility,[5] the Just Transition Fund,[6] Research and Innovation and specifically Horizon Europe,[7] Creative Europe,[8] policies supporting SMEs and entrepreneurship,[9] the Social Economy Action Plan,[10] the new long-term Vision for Rural Areas,[11] and, of course, Cohesion Policy.[12]

The OpenHeritage Project

OpenHeritage is developing inclusive cooperation, governance and management models for overlooked heritage sites by working with six Living Labs while analysing case studies 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 community engagement with heritage sites. A central concept of OpenHeritage is the idea of 'openness': open when looking at what constitutes heritage or open when deciding who should be involved in heritage processes, or open in terms of open-ended processes with possibilities for constant change.

www.openheritage.eu

Trends in the European context

Adaptive heritage reuse...

... is already widely used as a tool for urban regeneration, solving vacancy, restricting urban sprawl and connecting with local communities. Yet, it is un-evenly used across countries due to variation in national, regional and local level facilitation via acts and policy. This influences where AHR can happen, but also who can undertake such projects.

... can be a catalyst for (sustainable) local development. Especially when there is support for local or bottom-up AHR projects. Heritage and its reuse can be a resource for development, engagement, branding, tourism and more. As such it is becoming more popular as a sustainable way to care for heritage and is emerging as an key policy aim in several national policy frameworks and in EU governance.

... is emerging in other EU policy, funding and programme aims e.g. energy-saving, greening, circularity, reducing carbon and nitrogen emissions, crisis recovery, local identity and localism, tourism, participation and inclusion, stimulating the cultural and creative industries, as well as supporting youth, wellbeing and other agendas.

... is ready to be mainstreamed in the EU as a tool in a variety of policy and funding agendas as a logical next step after the success of the 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage,[13] which provided a great stimulus for mainstreaming heritage across policies and programmes.

... is at the intersection of crucial policy concerns, including environmental and social sustainability, creative and innovative practices, local identity, social justice, circular and low-carbon economy, health and wellbeing. It provides opportunities to tackle the climate crisis, creates space for creatives and start-ups, fosters local identity, culture and well-being, and contributes to sustainable and integrated socio-economic development.

... is often seen as central to local identity and sense of place and if managed in a not-for-financial-profit way, it can create affordable space, which is essential for cultural initiatives, artists, musicians and other creatives. As such, AHR supports issues of connection, identity, social cohesion and wellbeing, in line also with the New European Bauhaus values: Beautiful, Sustainable, Together.[14]

... can be part of an act of protest to (re)claim space, prevent demolition or highlight the value of local assets and identity, especially for minoritised groups in society.

... is already a visible part of sustainability agendas in some EU countries as pursued by a governmental organisation to pilot, explore and illustrate suitable governance and funding models, as well as lead by example through reusing historic buildings for ministries, government offices, EU offices, embassies and other public bodies.

... is a way to deal with a wide variety of heritage narratives going beyond those that are dominant and hegemonic, and to thus become more inclusive, for example paying tribute to a variety of people and their memories and histories, and recognising and addressing problematic and painful histories. The AHR process must be facilitated to address this in ethical, sensitive and open ways.

Key challenges in the European context

Adaptive Heritage Reuse...

... is often called something else. The terminology around the practice of adaptive reuse varies widely and can fall under many terms including reuse, regeneration, rehabilitation, restoration and conservation — which can result in a lack of specificity, or the exclusion of projects, in calls and requirements for funding, procurement, tendering etc.

... needs further mainstreaming as a tool in EU programmes that focus on territorial development. It is already recommended and signposted in some programmes where dealing with heritage is more common, e.g. tourism and regional development. The challenge is to make it a more common practice across the board in Cohesion Policy,[15] including in regional, urban and rural development financed and co-financed by the EU, as well as in EU-funded cross-border cooperation.

... needs financial investment. The challenge is to be recognised by European-level investment vehicles like the European Investment Bank or the Council of Europe Development Bank as a key sector to invest in, while understanding the specificities of public-community partnerships.

... needs an ethical framework. OpenHeritage shows AHR can contribute to general economic, social, environmental and cultural aims for wider areas, improve quality of life and reduce climate impacts. The challenge is to make sure that commodifying and capitalising on heritage doesn't make heritage a tool of gentrification or touristification, and that benefits are equitably shared across communities.

... needs to be MORE than a 'Repair, Recycle, Reuse'. In the context of climate breakdown, we must use material recycling and reduce carbon and nitrogen emissions in our practices. Climate agendas already identify the value of reuse of (heritage) buildings or sites in terms of environmental impact, but we cannot see environmental justice as separate from social justice — as is also evident in the Green Deal and Just Transition scheme, through "making sure no one is left behind."[16] The challenge is using AHR to create visible and direct links between environmental and social justice in such agendas.

... is not a neutral act, representations of history, engagement with some pasts and not others, and interventions in historic sites have meaning, they have positive and negative impacts for and on people. Understanding heritage dissonance and how history and heritage are mobilised in favour of extremist and populist political narratives is important. The challenge is to use AHR as a tool to address plurality, rather than to consider it as a politically neutral activity.

... can overcome disparities in participation and access. Some national (as well as regional and local) policy systems explicitly encourage civic engagement, while others have a more neutral position or actively discourage civic engagement. Our research shows that the success of AHR tends to depend on the possibility to engage people in increasing the quality of their living environment. Similarly, different European regions have different access to ethical, non-speculative finance that enables community-led initiatives to undertake significant real estate development projects. A policy challenge is how to overcome these inequalities, as well as mitigate some of them, through the EU working directly with the 'local' level, and vice versa.

Key challenges in the European context

Adaptive Heritage Reuse...

... is often a very localised practice, far removed from the sphere that the EU institutions operate in. Direct contact, funding and influence can seem difficult. The challenge is to extend and build on existing programmes, as well as information points, agencies and networks, that directly reach projects (such as cross-border project funding, living labs, good practice sharing, labels, awards, exchange and learning programmes etc.) and for those projects to know what is available for them on the EU level.

... is not always supported by building regulations and codes, which tend to be developed for either new build *or* heritage, making AHR as an 'in-between' option complicated depending on the availability of local discretion, as well as knowledge, willingness and capacity. The challenge is to make AHR more attractive and possible by adapting, and not letting go, of regulations around e.g. fire safety, material recycling, construction waste, land use, or heritage protection.

... is not always facilitated by regulations and criteria, which tend also to be developed for either new build or heritage preservation. This can apply to a wide variety of things, e.g. the fiscal rules, levies, tax and funding rules for temporary use or reuse, and our understandings of, for example,'value for money' or 'carbon neutral' in tenders and procurement rules.

... often depends on temporary and meanwhile-use. This presents numerous challenges related to issues of fostering gentrification, questions of ownership, value capture and unethical 'use' of local communities, artists and other creatives for meanwhile use.

... is often promoted as a tool to involve local communities by setting up participatory processes and mobilising local identity. The challenge is to support this without taking away rights, inserting precarity and the threat of displacement, and thus to fund projects to undertake genuine engagement, build long-term relationships and establish trust among parties involved.

... is suffering from the impacts of COVID-19 on the construction industry and global supply chains, for example in production delays, worker shortages and material shortages, in turn leading to rising costs and thereby financial issues for many construction projects. Impacts continue to be felt, thus financing of AHR projects will continue to be a challenge.

... is heavily constrained by the energy crisis as many AHR projects deal with large spaces that are difficult to heat and they often undertake renovation and restoration works on a step-by-step basis, which tends to defer insulation and renewable energy installations to later stages of the regeneration process.

Recommendations

OpenHeritage Recommendations

These recommendations are grouped around four themes: greener, smarter, integrated and locally-led. They are relevant for frameworks managed by the EU's institutions (i.e. centrally managed programmes) as well as those that are jointly managed by the EU institutions and the Member States (e.g. Cohesion Policy funds) or those directly managed by the Member States (e.g. National Recovery and Resilience Plans under the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility).

Greener: reduce, recycle, repair, reuse

Push the momentum around AHR in relation to climate change. Facilitating AHR and using AHR as a tool is starting to become more common in sustainability and climate change agendas, such as in the current focus on renovated, energy efficient buildings, in a general push for Repair, Recycle and Re-use in the European Green Deal, and in Cohesion Policy's priority of funding smarter, greener and locally led development. Mainstreaming AHR can push these agendas further.

Increase the focus on nitrogen carbon reduction, waste management and material recycling. The global construction industry is a significant contributor to emissions and thus climate change. Renovation and reuse are usually more sustainable alternatives. Strong international partnerships and cooperation on aspects of environmental sustainability are required to meet the shared goal of averting environmental disaster.

Influence standards and regulatory frameworks in particular building codes, especially the renewal of the Eurocodes (due 2026), as well as more generally CEN and ISO codes, but also tax, procurement and tender rules. These could be reviewed specifically in relation to AHR practices to ensure they don't disadvantage reuse.

Make 'green financing' available specifically for reuse and/or create other targeted funding for AHR projects which address SDGs and/or EGD targets.

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 intervention, regulation, or collaboration. Lead by example and organise around environmental impacts, and the Climate Crisis by, for example, the EU making a commitment to only reuse existing buildings for its offices across Europe.

Recommendations

Smarter: innovative and collaborative tools and templates

Promote volunteer management and the establishment of (local) ethical frameworks for non-exploitative practices. The EU could provide templates for local partnerships to adapt and adopt, as well as strategies to create 'commons' networks to support commons and community organising. This would allow local communities to become self-sustaining through a dedicated public budget in order to go beyond volunteering. This should also be linked to skills and capacity building programmes, and to existing European volunteer frameworks such as the European Solidarity Corps.[17]

Build national or international cooperation and collective momentum around a database. The OpenHeritage database is a good start and can be expanded to share more experiences, examples, policy contexts and inspiration — both expert-led and crowd-sourced. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, developing appropriate digital communications, databases and networking tools for sharing and disseminating knowledge and learnings is an ongoing challenge.

Make vacancy and underutilisation visible through open-source mapping and crowdsourcing. The EU can play an important role in the opening up and democratisation of information on vacancy, for example through linking up databases such as the OpenHeritage database[18] with the Collaborative Cloud for Cultural Heritage,[19] which is currently being established under the Horizon Europe programme. By sharing inventory and mapping methods, tools and access to data this can help to reveal vacancy, ownership, potential users and community needs, and can thus also support the further development of area-based partnership working.

Funding and support for capital work, use and collaboration. Projects benefit from a combination of both funds and support in the form of sharing knowledge, mentoring and practices. Financial support could be achieved through the development of a dedicated European (investment) fund for AHR, which could then also offer — or collaborate with a network that offers — additional support and mentoring, as well as gather and share knowledge of good practices.

Make visible the positive and negative impacts of AHR. A database with projects should include not just 'benefits' but also warn against potential negative impacts, such as displacement, erasure of histories, gentrification, commodification and cultural appropriation, and offer smart and ethical collaborative tools, templates and governance principles to counter these potential negative impacts.

Recommendations

Integrated: cross-sectoral agendas and understandings

Further mainstream AHR as a crucial tool in current and future agendas such as European Green Deal and New European Bauhaus; New European Agenda for Culture and the Creative Europe programme; European Research Area and the Horizon Europe programme; Cohesion Policy[20] and its specific funds: European Regional Development Fund, European Social Fund+, Cohesion Fund, Just Transition Fund and Interreg; Common Agricultural Policy and the European agricultural fund for rural development, and The New European Innovation Agenda. Now is the time to capitalise on the knowledge, interest and need to make a push for mainstreaming AHR as a tool in and for these important agendas.

Make AHR a more explicitly promoted solution, tool and ethical practice in wider EU policy and funding frameworks. Reuse should be explicitly favoured over new construction, and thus clearer and more visibly integrated into wider policy agendas, making the development they stimulate more sustainable. This can be a wide range of policies such as those in culture, climate, tourism, regional and rural development, housing, youth, education and beyond.

Facilitate, incentivise and fund AHR through non-heritage routes: culture, youth, social, educational, tourism, sports, or creative organisations all need spaces to operate in. For instance, Rural, Social and Cultural Funds, or funds supporting SMEs, could incentivise and support beneficiaries of their funding and loans to reuse existing building stock rather than build new space. This can also help link to social inclusion by addressing histories, meanings and stories, and thus heritage dissonance, through events, storytelling, architectural intervention, or educational programmes.

Support new models of work for renovation and maintenance. Various EU initiatives (e.g. ESF+, Creative Europe, European Urban Initiative) focus on capacity building, employment, education and skills and can support and develop training focused on capacity building in the cultural and creative sectors, renovation and repair skills in construction (e.g. reusing existing material, restoration techniques, maintenance and working with traditional materials). This can also address labour and skill shortages as well as youth unemployment on a local level, increase retention and future-proof jobs, and create a more sustainable and circular cycle of employment and investment.

Create awareness of terminological variation across countries, so challenges, procedures, expertise and responsibility can be made specific to the practice of AHR. Including AHR terminology within EU policies might be useful in mainstreaming practice, which may then also lead to transfer of terminology. It can also reinforce international cooperation.

Support and promote living labs, as places where various agendas and sectors meet. The EU could establish long(er) term or follow-up funding for support, networking, knowledge production, peer-to-peer exchange, intersectoral working and critical living lab studies. This can occur both through 'active' living labs and through follow-up 'sustainability funds' e.g. via the European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL). The EU could adopt, develop and build on the OpenHeritage database to facilitate AHR matchmaking, partnerships, peer-learning and vacancy mapping. This can also help the continuation of connections and networks, cross-fertilisation of learnings between labs and advance community-building momentum.

Recommendations

Locally-led: ethical partnership, participation and local identity

Help local actors and support bottom-up initiatives by creating clearer pathways to access funding (public and/or private) and capacity (e.g. available experts, knowledge, information, support) for AHR. It can be particularly helpful for actors in countries with low levels of support, or missing adequate financial infrastructure, to be able to directly access EU funds, grants and loans. Centralisation can be a barrier in some cases; direct support for AHR could be driven through the support of municipalities and other local actors.

Often AHR projects need help navigating the possible options, whether at EU, national, or regional level. The EU could provide access to funding for mentors, peers and training to navigate the AHR process, as well as develop a subsidy / funding guide or another resource point (online and/or via e.g. Europe Direct, Creative Europe Desks or other EU programmes' information points) for locally-led projects to know what is directly available on the EU level and/or national level through EU funds, for example, by adding AHR terminology to specific tools such as the CulturEU Funding Guide[21] or the Guide on EU funding for tourism[22] of the European Commission.

Integrate AHR within, build on and extend other existing programmes that directly reach local projects, such as the URBACT[23] and Interreg[24] programmes, the European Urban Initiative,[25] Horizon Europe[26] with its focus on partnerships, living labs and good practice sharing, but also in celebration of heritage, through labels, awards[27] and other research, networking, (peer) exchange and (peer) learning programmes.

Direct support for the local level and local partnerships can also happen through non-heritage routes. Informal (or local, or unlisted) heritage often doesn't qualify for national heritage funding programmes, but can be important for local identity and locally-led regeneration. In some countries, formal heritage status can limit the possibilities for AHR significantly. The EU could also encourage national governments to make AHR eligible for heritage funding and tax relief.

Support regional and international collaboration and learning across sectors and projects. The EU can further expand how they showcase and directly fund a wide(r) range of creative AHR projects with a very broad understanding of heritage, online and offline. It can put the spotlight on good practices through events such as European Heritage Days,[28] European Capitals of Culture,[29] network-meetings, site visits, New European Bauhaus prizes,[30] European Heritage Awards,[31] the European Heritage Label,[32] and other good practice sharing. Communication should be multilingual and inclusive so that good practices, including financial and governance practices, are made fully accessible to all.

Locally-led: ethical partnership, participation and local identity (continued)

✪ **Promote strong locally-led partnerships between stakeholders.** Not only can they help reduce inter-local and inter-project competition, but they can also support local learning and sharing. It is crucial that contributions are not played out against each other, and 'communities' disregarded in favour of 'experts' or vice versa — collaboration is key. Support for international and pan-European networks working on the topic of independent AHR art spaces and creative hubs to foster and share practices in collaborative working, local governance and funding mechanisms is crucial.

✪ **Develop an ethical re-use and meanwhile-use framework** which can be adopted by projects, partnerships, or local authorities. These should be sensitive and inclusive enough to cater to the particulars of varying project contexts and engage with ethical collaboration, partnerships, participatory practices, material sustainability, story-telling and historical research, and help to organise against displacement and exploitation. They should help create a sense of shared responsibility for the consequences of ensuing development between all partners.

✪ **In the wake of a new (post) pandemic reality,** austerity and crisis recovery are happening, and the decade after the financial crash shows us heritage and adaptive reuse have a central role in crisis recovery. The Member States could further showcase and promote (across the EU) the role of AHR in National Recovery and Resilience Plans.[33] Furthermore, the EU institutions could also go beyond the Recovery and Resilience Facility to make other innovative funding options available, possibly through a separate fund with the European Development Bank or via Invest EU, to support locally-led AHR and mitigate uncertainty and risk.

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[All accessed 12 September 2022.]

Imprint

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The highlighted countries are the locations of the OpenHeritage Observatory Cases and Cooperative Heritage Lab case studies.