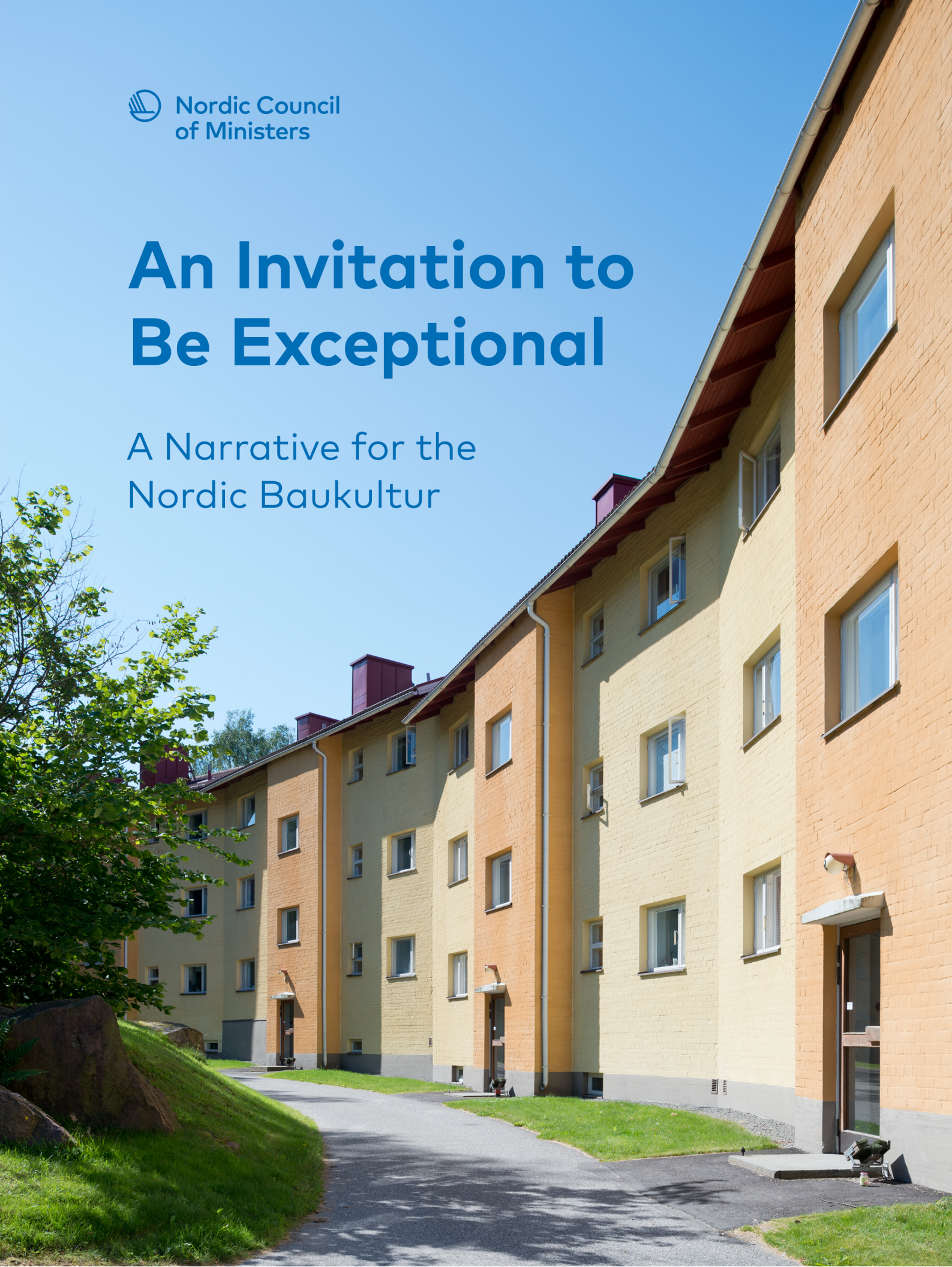


An Invitation to Be Exceptional

A Narrative for the
Nordic Baukultur



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An Invitation to Be Exceptional: A Narrative for the Nordic Baukultur

The Nordic countries are known for successful societal transformations that have improved the quality of life. Our built environment has reflected these transformations until now. As we have entered the current multi-crisis era, our perception of the built environment must once again be transformed. This requires a cultural shift. In this report, we present a narrative for the Nordic Baukultur, a vision to push us forward.

The Nordic region is unique, paraded around the world as an example of compassionate and well-functioning societies. We're proud without being arrogant. We're inviting without being imposing. Yet, even here, we have work to do.

Our built environment determines the quality of life our societies provide and how they impact the planet. It's a physical manifestation of who we are as a people. However, it's not functioning as it should. Quality housing is becoming increasingly inaccessible, while decisions and processes of building development are often non-transparent and undemocratic. Meanwhile, our built environment is one of the biggest causes of environmental degradation in terms of carbon emissions, biodiversity loss, and natural resource depletion. Even bigger than other damaging sectors such as energy, food, and transportation. What is more, each of these have much better roadmaps to zero carbon.

The Nordics have cherished openness, collaboration, welfare for all, and a connection to nature like no other. Yet our contemporary construction doesn't reflect these values or our collective identity. We now have a unique opportunity to do better. To reconsider what a truly Nordic approach to the built environment means.

This report introduces a new narrative for the Nordic construction culture, Baukultur. The narrative is part of a project called Nordic Networks for Circular Construction, funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers. Several built environment experts from all the Nordic countries have participated in discussions and workshops to drive the development. We describe the process in more detail at the end of this report.

Transformation Through Culture

Baukultur is a German word that translates to “building culture.” The concept has emerged as a way to address the built environment’s turmoil and to challenge us to think differently. It’s a holistic approach emphasizing quality, sustainability, and social inclusion. Baukultur covers all aspects of the built environment, from urban planning and architecture to landscape design and construction. Its sister concept, high-quality Baukultur, is a building culture that aims to meet the highest standards of excellence. These standards vary depending on the context, but they typically include aesthetics, functionality, sustainability, and cultural significance.

Culture guides people in situations where there are no rules or outspoken conventions. That’s why a cultural transformation of the built environment is crucial. Not only do we need a cultural narrative for the transformation, but we also have to prioritize it. As the direction and purpose of construction change constantly, its rules, measurements, criteria, and targets are in flux and often contradictory. Thus, we can only rely on culture to guide us when other instruments of change are obscure or even counterproductive to decarbonizing the sector at record speed.

The concept of Baukultur has a long tradition in German-speaking countries, but the holistic approach to Baukultur was embedded in the 2018 [Davos Declaration](#). While the values of Baukultur are undeniable and have been part of the public discourse for years, they’ve failed to drive significant change. We can all agree that we want sustainability, quality, and inclusivity to guide our built environment. The challenge, however, is figuring out the concrete, practical ways to bring about this transformation. A Nordic interpretation of Baukultur is an opportunity to define what high-quality building culture means in our unique context. It also provides a chance for the Nordics to spearhead sustainable development, this time by creating a more expansive cultural concept that genuinely addresses the challenges of our time.

Nordic Baukultur invites us to level up: taking the environmental crisis seriously and fostering societal well-being means we have to do radically better than before. We need to change our perception of quality – the idea that we can “build better” will no longer cut it.



Good Quality for All, with Fossil Fuels

The postwar (re)construction caused an unprecedented boom in new construction. This was enabled by numerous innovations in building technologies, economic models, partnerships, and standardization. It was a leap forward in the fossil fuel era, and the boom answered the needs of quickly urbanizing and industrializing societies. It was sped up by the postwar generations joining the workforce in new professions. The leap was an astonishing example of modernity as efficiency and shared direction. It wasn't limited to just the construction sector. It highlighted the interplay between construction and other realms of society: finance, different levels of government, new policy areas, and other industries became an integral part of buildings, and buildings influenced how these realms operate.

While much has changed since the heyday of construction, the ethos has remained practically the same. Construction is geared towards efficient "home building." It's been extremely difficult to integrate other directions and values into how we create the material world around us.

The financialization of the built environment is a double-edged sword. Treating buildings as financial assets has created huge incentives for investments. It's enabled rapid development to meet the changing needs of growing populations. While it has served us well, this dynamic has become increasingly extreme, and the incentives are increasingly counter-effective. Previously, financialization served us by directing resources to assets and functions humans needed. Today, however, it's often in conflict with the same needs it was meant to serve.

Financial incentives tend to overpower human, planetary, and societal needs. They limit the actions of the stakeholders acting in good faith. We've become trapped in a system where new buildings are the only way for the construction industry to survive. Where razor-thin profit margins dictate the quality, the value of our natural world is erased from the balance sheet, and the decisions impacting the everyday experience of everyone rest solely in the hands of a few professionals.

Our current system has evolved to meet the needs of modernity, providing us with comfort and security. However, the challenges of today show that it's no longer fit for purpose.

Now, the fossil fuel era is ending. The Nordics face a slower growth pace both in terms of economy and population. How do we use what we already have to serve the needs of current and future generations? The future of the built environment isn't an abstraction. It's something profoundly concrete. We now understand that buildings have an impact far beyond their current use.

We need something new.

In the following section we present a vision for the future for our built environment. It is forward looking, but leans on the Nordic ethos.

A Vision for Nordic Baukultur

The Nordic ethos builds on openness, collaboration, welfare for all, and a connection to nature. These are also the building blocks for the ecological reconstruction of our built environment. The following vision for the Nordic Baukultur shows the way forward.

It is good to take into account that there's not only one Baukultur but several local ones, and their cores are always shaped by the members of the societies. The development of the built environment starts in a local context, serving local needs, which is now more crucial than ever. Urbanization creates a division between growing and shrinking areas. Growing areas continuously develop to accommodate the growth, while shrinking areas grapple with adapting the built environment to a smaller population. This highlights how critical local conceptualizations of Baukultur are. However, all these places and contexts ideally share multiple aspects and values that we'll soon dive deeper into.

To embody the values of our region, Nordic Baukultur must be more aspirational and practical than anything we've seen before. We must commit to making the most out of what already exists to move beyond the obsession to build more. We have to embrace what we already have and make it work for everyone. To see our existing resources as fuel for imagination, not a limitation.

A future where our connection to nature is reflected in our built environment. Where the materials, processes, spaces, and designs truly respect the planet and weave together the humane and the natural.

Nature plays such a central role in our societies that Nordic Baukultur needs to be in harmony with it. The welfare state project was about social regeneration – improving the well-being of everyone. It's only logical that the next phase is about regenerating the ecological systems that are the fundamentals of societal well-being.

Besides regeneration, we must reduce the harm done to the planet and its species. Taking the environmental crisis seriously calls for more than sustainable materials, technologies, and techniques. It requires the end of construction as we know it. While modernist Baukultur saw a location as a blank slate, contemporary Baukultur is deeply rooted in what already exists. Every place has its unique social, cultural, and biological characteristics, and they should form the base for development. Improving existing conditions is the starting point for regeneration. What's already there should be seen as a resource, not a cost. We should look at buildings as co-inhabitants of the ecosystem, mutually supportive of each other.

Ending construction as we know it means putting a stop to demolition. It means documenting all the buildings, putting some under strict protection, and dedicating some to work as platforms for change. We use what we have more efficiently and renovate existing structures to meet today's quality standards rather than destroy them to start fresh. Where this isn't possible, we carefully and circularly deconstruct and reuse instead of adopting standard demolition practices. This is a radical departure from what we're currently doing. However, for Nordic Baukultur to be not only sustainable but regenerative, we must embark on that journey. The Nordic ethos is perfectly suited to meet the massive challenge head-on.

A future where every building is a testament to the Nordic quality and contributes to a high quality of life for everyone. Where functional excellence is a statement of cultural appreciation, and our buildings symbolize and care for everyone.

We should proudly display our buildings as the physical heritage of the welfare state, preserving and restoring them. Baukultur stands for community, both between people and the natural world we're restoring through our practice. We're transitioning from a world where new buildings serve an increasingly small portion of society to one where we improve what we have to serve everyone. Our Baukultur can be seen as an extension of the Nordic conception of welfarism.

Dignity and a good life have always been at the core of Nordic values. Our cultures are not about excess. We've focused on satisfaction rather than maximization, and we've been successful because of it. Other countries look up to us because of our welfare services. The idea that quality of life is a universal right runs deep in our societies, and our built environment has historically reflected this. Quality is not just a matter of price. It's a public issue, a political discussion, and a way to elevate the lives of ordinary people.

From the Sagrada Família to the Parthenon, many past examples of Baukultur have been highly individualistic. The Nordic quality ideal extends functionality for all and is at the core of our interpretation of Baukultur. Here, the examples of Baukultur are not single buildings but programs, styles, ideas, policies, instruments, and movements. They're entire areas that embody the exceptionally universal ethos of the Nordics.

Compared to past leaps of progress, this transformation is different. The emerging digital world expands our opportunities beyond physical reality. The hybridization of spaces frees users from the constraints of space.

For decades, the design mantra has stated that form follows function. But in a hybrid reality, the importance of the form diminishes, and the variety of functions is almost endless.

A future where communities have agency over their environments. Where everyone from workers to residents and local businesses to community groups get their voices heard about how the environment around us looks, feels, and functions.

The transition to Nordic Baukultur must be just. We need to strike a fine balance between innovative leaps forward and measured, careful consideration. This means that all stakeholders – the construction industry, planners, policymakers, architects, and residents – must have a chance to actively participate in shaping the transition. We must pay special attention to groups that have been historically marginalized by our current system.

Justice is about more than just giving people a voice. Transitions create benefits and burdens; we must distribute these fairly, balancing diverse and sometimes conflicting needs. We must respect and provide for everyone as well as possible.

To put Nordic Baukultur into practice, it has to evoke a sense of collective ownership. We'll remain stuck with business as usual if we can't demonstrate the value of transformation to its possible partners on their terms or dispel fears of what might be threatened or lost. There's still a large gap between the vision of our narrative and the reality of what a transformed built environment will look, feel, and function like in the varied locations that make up the Nordics. If we don't fill this gap, we can't catalyze the level of transformation needed.



250m Magasinet

Magasinet i Vaxholm

Bistro-Bar-Café

ROOF TOP
TERRACE
INTERIOR DESIGN
FASHION

200m

A future where we come together to innovate and experiment with new technical and economical ownership and decision-making models. There's plenty of work for all, but it's also an invitation to be exceptional.

The Nordic people are innovators of a specific kind. Time and again, we've set new standards for using collaboration, ingenuity, and experimentation to solve the most complex problems. Today, we need to rise to the occasion as innovators again. One of the biggest challenges of our era is balancing between providing quality housing for everyone and the importance of zero-carbon construction. The central and deep-rooted role of construction in the Nordics is both our asset and a threat. There are numerous levers we can pull, yet many things still depend on building new.

Another challenge relates to power, trust, and the particular way we understand democracy in the Nordics. It's a way of life, a never-ending collective and individual process of democratization – a mission to live together autonomously. We must innovate and extend our systems of democracy to allow participation in planning, designing, and ownership of the built environment for those whose lives it dictates. We have to leverage our powers to create new models for participatory design, ownership, financial, and economic models that align the interests of the inhabitants and the owners of the buildings. As is typical for Nordic people, we should empower each other to take agency and trust that our peers will use it for the common good.

We must also innovate with technical tools and methods to embrace biomaterials, restoration, and circular material use. We don't have many examples of the look and feel of buildings that are materially different yet. However, there's new value in novel uses of new kinds of materials and their combinations and extensions. Here, hybridization of the built environment offers another route to innovation: we can model, simulate, and experiment with homes, buildings, areas, and ecosystems without having to wait for the results post-construction.

A future where the Nordics are global leaders in cutting-edge technologies and methods. Where the new business models emerged from these practices provide opportunities to set an example for how positive transformation can enable economic success.

Commercial actors need dialogue and support around new business models and markets. We must work collaboratively with business leaders, supporting them as they enter this uncharted territory. We can empower them to once again act as the visionaries they've repeatedly proven themselves to be.

There's a lot of new carbon-neutral infrastructure to build. For architects, engineers, and technologists, it means an opportunity to unleash their creative potential. To feel inspired by their new roles. Rather than buildings, we should build communities and models for ownership and collaboration. Connecting spaces and their users is more important than ever. We must align creative expression and interpretation with environmental and social regeneration if we want Nordic Baukultur to extend beyond policy and regulation.

For ordinary citizens, it means emphasizing and cherishing localized autonomy so that they don't see Baukultur as just another top-down imposition or restriction of individual freedom.

Transformations Create New Tensions

This is not an easy path. Our vision is a generational transformation in an era already characterized by disruption. Navigating this reality requires every ounce of our innovativeness and resourcefulness. It's possible, but we must overcome several pressing challenges.

First, we must address the dynamics of urbanization and population growth. More people will need access to built infrastructure. When greater numbers of these populations move to cities, it strains our existing buildings even more. We must better understand how to best use what we have to leave space for these growth dynamics. We shouldn't simply resort to endless expansion. We also need to confront the likeliness of needing some new buildings and consider how we can do that while maximizing the impact and minimizing the ecological footprint. Solutions like adding new floors to apartment buildings or extending existing structures hint at what this approach could look like.

There's also the question of affordability. In our current system, the cost of buildings, particularly housing, is strongly linked to supply. The end of construction as we know it would inevitably limit supply. Unless we're careful, there's a risk of creating more tension between planetary and human well-being. We need new ways of ownership and governance. The Nordic history of cooperative ownership and state proactivity can help resolve this tension.

Affordability isn't just an economic hurdle. The construction and real estate sectors play a significant part in our economies. In addition to providing jobs, they're vehicles of some of the only place-specific investments in an era of globalized capital. We must explore new ways of place-based value creation. We have to reimagine the functions of our buildings beyond financial assets.

Besides mere population growth, we're faced with the challenges of migration. We've already seen a significant increase in migration due to conflicts and instability, and the climate crisis will only increase it. The demographics of our growing population are changing. It brings us to a question: What does a Baukultur embodying the Nordic culture look like when the culture itself is constantly evolving? It must be welcoming and accessible to all Nordic citizens while ensuring it captures the uniqueness of our region. We should challenge the Nordic core values in a way that leaves previous norms and concepts open to change.



A Great Future Is Possible if We Act Together

The end of construction as we know it presents one of the biggest challenges we've faced since the turmoil of the postwar period. But the Nordic people have proven time and again that we're up for it. We have the opportunity to create a building culture that fuses together everything that makes us special, from our ingenuity to our care systems and our deep connection to the natural world. A building culture we can once again be proud of. A building culture that is truly ours.

It is a call for us in the Nordics. We have already previously solved societal tensions and improved our living conditions. We know how to do it and now it is time to do that once again. Even though we tend to be humble with our actions, the Baukultur gives us an invitation to be exceptional.

How Was the Narrative Constructed?

The narrative part of a project called Nordic Networks for Circular Construction, funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers. Its development was executed by think tank Demos Helsinki.

The work began with a background study of the concept of Baukultur and its contextualisation in the architectural policies of different Nordic countries. We enriched the analysis with interviews of architectural policy experts. Through the analysis, we identified Nordic specialties and potential building blocks for the new narrative.

In the latter phase of the process, multiple built environment experts from all the Nordic Countries contributed to discussions and workshops. We formulated various hypotheses of the narrative that were tested with the experts. Based on the evaluation, we began constructing the narrative and presented it to the expert audience. Based on their feedback, we finalized the narrative.

The report was written by Theo Cox, Otto-Wille Koste, and Roope Mokka of Demos Helsinki.

About this publication

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Nordic co-operation

Nordic co-operation is one of the world's most extensive forms of regional collaboration, involving Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland.

Nordic co-operation has firm traditions in politics, economics and culture and plays an important role in European and international forums. The Nordic community strives for a strong Nordic Region in a strong Europe.

Nordic co-operation promotes regional interests and values in a global world. The values shared by the Nordic countries help make the region one of the most innovative and competitive in the world.

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