Nordic Council of Ministers

Inspiration Catalogue for Policy Measures to Improve the Use of Existing Buildings

Contents

This publication is also available online in a web-accessible version at:
https://pub.norden.org/temanord2026-517

Preface

by Dan Jørgensen, EU Commissioner for Energy and Housing

Europe is facing a crisis of housing affordability that touches every corner of our continent. For too many of our citizens, finding a home that is affordable has become an impossible task. This urgent social and economic reality led me to launch Europe's first-ever Affordable Housing Plan. It recognises that improving the affordability of housing goes hand in hand with sustainability and quality.

Supply has not kept up with evolving demand due to high construction costs, innovation deficits, shortages of skilled labour and excessive red tape. The EU will need more than two million homes per year to match the current demand. However, this doesn't just mean new buildings.

Maximising the efficient use of the existing building stock – avoiding unnecessary demolitions and waste – should be a priority alongside new construction. This includes renovating inefficient buildings and bringing vacant properties back into use. In addition, the construction sector has huge potential to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, waste and water use by switching to more innovative, decarbonised and biobased materials.

With National Building Renovation Plans due later this year, Member States have a historic opportunity to transform the building stock. Our goal remains clear: to accelerate renovation rates and ensure that our buildings are resilient and fit for a future powered by reliable, affordable and clean energy.

I am glad that this report by Nordic Sustainable Construction provides inspiring examples of practical ways to achieve this vision, and I thank them for this important work.

About this Inspiration Catalogue

This catalogue has been prepared as part of the Nordic Sustainable Construction programme's Work Package on Circularity. The work is initiated by the Nordic Ministers for Housing and Construction and funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

The programme contributes to the Nordic Council of Ministers' Vision 2030 by supporting the Nordics in becoming the leading region in sustainable and competitive construction and housing, with minimal environmental and climate impact.

Its purpose is to support the green, digital, and circular transition of the Nordic construction sector by creating and sharing new knowledge, initiating sectoral debates, fostering networks, workshops, and best-practice cases, and supporting the alignment of Nordic regulations on the climate and environmental impact of buildings.

The Nordic Sustainable Construction programme, which runs from 2025 through 2027, is supported by a secretariat and focuses on the following three areas:

- Climate Work Package run by the Housing and Construction Authority in Iceland
- Circularity Work Package run by the Danish Authority for Social Services and Housing
- EU Work Package run by the Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning

This first edition of the catalogue draws on input from the Nordic Climate Forum for Construction 2025, conferences across the construction sector, the LinkedIn page of Nordic Sustainable Construction, and construction authorities across the Nordic region.

Nordic Sustainable Construction

For more information on Nordic Sustainable Construction, visit our website here: Nordic Sustainable Construction.

> ***We, the Nordic Ministers for Housing and Construction, recognise the potential in preserving and developing existing building stock as a contribution to reduced emissions.***
>
> Nordic Council of Ministers, Sep. 2023

The Hierarchy of Resource-efficient Construction: A Tool for Prioritising Actions

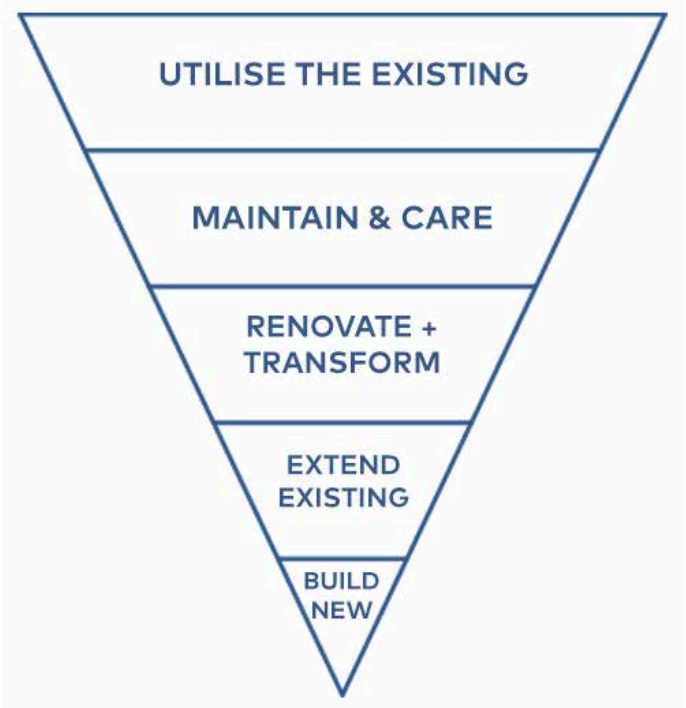
The hierarchy of resource-efficient construction is a valuable tool for prioritising actions related to existing buildings. It helps guide decisions on whether to utilise, maintain, renovate and transform, extend or build new.

The priority is to utilise the existing building stock, minimising the need for new construction. **Maintenance** should be the next step to ensure longevity and prevent costly renovations. When adaptation is required, **renovation and transformation** should be considered to allow buildings to meet modern needs while conserving resources. For buildings with potential, **extension** can enhance their functionality without resorting to new construction.

Finally, **building new** should only be considered when all other options have been explored.

Although the purpose is to optimise the use of existing buildings, it is important to recognise that not all buildings can be saved. Some may be too deteriorated to be effectively renovated, or the cost of renovation may outweigh the benefits, particularly in areas where the building's value will never recover the investment. In such cases, demolition and, if needed, new construction may be the more viable option.

This hierarchy helps focus policies on the most sustainable actions, ensuring efficient use of resources and reducing waste.



Source: *Towards Sustainable Architecture: Finland's national architectural policy programme 2022–2035*. Original concept by Matti Kuittinen, Aalto University.

Five Strategic Action Areas

Turning the Hierarchy into Action

Building on the principles outlined in the hierarchy, which prioritise the most sustainable and resource-efficient actions for existing buildings, the following **Five Strategic Action Areas** provide a structured approach to improving the use of these buildings.

The action areas can guide policymakers and authorities to enhance the sustainability, adaptability, and efficiency of the existing building stock.

The first area focuses on creating a robust data foundation, while the remaining areas define specific domains for direct action, offering clear guidance on how to optimise existing buildings, promote renovation, and support the efficient use of resources.

Below, you can see an overview of the five areas.

1. Mapping the existing building stock

Establishment of an overview of what buildings exist, how they are used, and how needs are expected to change over time.

Target:

- Establishing an overview of existing buildings, their use and future need

→ Cases

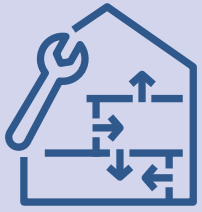
2. Prioritising maintenance and efficient use

Policy measures to influence how existing buildings are used and adapted.

Targets:

- Extending building lifetimes
- Enabling multiuse and efficient utilisation of m²

→ Cases



3. Driving renovation instead of demolition

Policy measures to shape whether renovation is chosen over demolition and new construction.

Targets:

- Reducing unnecessary demolition
- Removing barriers to efficient renovation

→ Cases

4. Enabling changed use efficiently

Policy measures to enable e.g., an office building being turned into housing.

Targets:

- Reducing unnecessary demolition
- Removing barriers to efficient changed use

→ Cases

5. Renovating for the future

Policy measures to guide how buildings are designed and delivered once projects are underway.

Targets:

- Optimising design for flexibility and efficiency
- Designing for disassembly and reuse

→ Cases

Policy Measures and Case Examples from the Nordic Region

Policy Measures and Case Examples

On the following pages, we present a range of policy measures and case examples that focus on optimising the use of the existing buildings. These measures are either already in use or awaiting planned implementation. The policy measures are categorised into five action areas and further classified according to their type:

Regulatory Policies: Policies that establish rules, or requirements to guide actions (e.g., building codes, guidance).

Economic Policies: Policies that use financial instruments, incentives, or taxes to encourage specific actions (e.g., grants, tax incentives).

Information/Organisational Policies: Policies that aim to inform or organise actors, providing knowledge, guidance, or structuring processes to enable change (e.g., awareness campaigns, best practice guidance).

Alongside the three policy categories, the catalogue also includes cases that are:

Research/Analytical Initiatives or Practice-driven initiatives: Initiatives that generate knowledge, test approaches, or provide evidence to inform and support future policy development. This includes research activities such as studies and mapping exercises, as well as practice-driven initiatives like pilot or demonstration projects that test solutions in real-world settings.

1. Mapping the Existing Building Stock

Cases

1.1 Denmark – Mapping the extent and reasons for demolition of buildings

1.2 Finland – Mapping Empty Office Space

1.3 Finland – Study on the Climate Impacts of Vacant and Demolished Building Stock

1.4 Norway – Mapping of Vacant Buildings

1.1 Denmark – Mapping the extent and reasons for demolition of buildings

As part of the Danish Strategy for Sustainable Construction, the Danish Authority for Social Services and Housing has commissioned a report examining the extent and reasons for building demolition in Denmark.

The report prepared by the Danish research institute, the BUILD Department of the Built Environment, has gathered significant data, showing, among other things, that in the period 2012-2023, an average of approximately 2.2 million m² of building area was demolished per year.

The report shows that in Denmark, agricultural buildings account for the largest share of demolished area at 46%, while single-family houses account for 13%, especially in the Capital Region. Around 20% of what is demolished is replaced with new construction for the same purpose.

At the same time, the analysis shows that around 60% of the buildings demolished were built after 1960.

Policy Type: Information/Organisational Policy (creating an improved data foundation)

For further information (in Danish): Extent and causes of demolition of existing buildings (sbst.dk)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

1.2 Finland – Mapping Empty Office Space

The Helsinki Research Forum has produced research documenting the extent of empty office space in the Helsinki metropolitan area, identifying where under-utilised commercial buildings exist.

The mapping provides valuable data on office vacancy rates in areas where the Forum collects information, offering insights into the scale and location of unused offices that could be repurposed for housing or other community uses.

This evidence base supports more informed decisions on adaptive reuse and helps local authorities prioritise interventions to optimise existing building stock, reducing pressure for new construction.

Research Initiative (Not a Policy)

For further information (in Finnish): Helsinki Research Forum: The growth of office vacancy in the Capital Region continues – over 661,000 square meters of vacant office space (rakli.fi)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

1.3 Finland – Study on the Climate Impacts of Vacant and Demolished Building Stock

Finland is conducting a study on the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions impacts of unoccupied buildings, focusing on residential, healthcare, school and office buildings.

The study estimates the annual demolition rates and the number of vacant or abandoned buildings. It examines various scenarios, including business-as-usual, large-scale material reuse, and repurposing buildings for new uses.

The study is expected to raise awareness of the challenges posed by vacant buildings, especially in depopulated areas. One key challenge is the lack of data on the level of use of these buildings, which hinders a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

The initiative aims to provide clearer insights into how vacant buildings can be reused sustainably to reduce emissions and waste.

Research Initiative (Not a Policy)

For further information: Empty, underutilized and demolition-threatened buildings hold significant potential to reduce climate emissions (In Finnish and Swedish)

Photo: Annukka Lyra

1.4 Norway – Mapping of Vacant Buildings

Norway has developed an interactive digital platform, currently in progress, to map vacant and under-used buildings nationwide, supported by the Norwegian Housing Bank, a state-owned public agency under the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development.

The initiative invites municipalities, building owners and the public to contribute with information about vacant or under-utilised buildings that could be considered for reuse and renovation.

The platform aims to make such buildings more visible. By highlighting existing buildings that deserve renewed life, the initiative supports efforts to unlock environmental and social value through reuse and adaptive use, reducing reliance on new construction where appropriate.

Research Initiative: Information/Organisational Policy

For further information (in Norwegian): Tomme bygg (tommebygg.no)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

2. Prioritising Maintenance and Efficient Use

Cases

2.1 Denmark – Tool for Subdividing Single-Family Houses

EFFEKT Arkitekter and Vigør, in collaboration with Lejre Municipality, have developed a practical process tool to support the local spread of subdivided single-family houses.

The tool titled "Sharing houses in the municipality" identifies barriers and opportunities and proposes ten concrete actions municipalities can use to facilitate housing sharing and subdivision.

The tool is based on research, workshops, and testing in the village of Ejby and provides municipalities with a structured approach to analysing local potential, engaging citizens, and adjusting planning frameworks where necessary. It demonstrates how subdivision of existing houses can support climate goals, housing diversity, and revitalisation of local communities.

By focusing on process, dialogue, and incremental regulatory adjustments, the initiative offers a replicable model for municipalities seeking to make more efficient use of existing housing stock.

Research Initiative (Not a Policy)

For further information (in Danish): Sharing Houses in the Municipality (pdf)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

2.2 Finland – Development of Utilisation-Rate Metrics

Finland is developing metrics to track and improve the efficient use of space in buildings, focusing on usage patterns during working hours, evenings, and weekends.

The initiative, linked to the Finnish Circular Economy Green Deal, proposes a Utilisation Rate Declaration that includes key indicators, such as total utilisation rate usage across different times of day and usage at weekends.

The metrics will help building owners and authorities identify under-utilised areas and buildings, optimise space use and reduce operating costs.

The proposal has been tested by three large building owners. Its implementation is expected to become more widespread as the methodology evolves.

This initiative is funded by the Ministry of the Environment of Finland. A final report has been published in February 2026.

Research Initiative: Information/Organisational Policy

For further information: A policy brief article will be published in Finnish and in English in March 2026, titled "The Building Occupancy Rate Indicator: Proposal for a Key Figure Measuring the Efficiency of Building Use."

Photo: Alsu Vershinina/Unsplash

2.3 Greenland – Renovation Programmes for Public and Self-Built Homes

Greenland is implementing long-term initiatives to improve its existing housing stock by prioritising renovation over demolition.

The "Together for Healthy Homes" programme (2025–2044) aims to reduce accumulated maintenance backlogs in public housing, improve energy performance, reduce CO_2 emissions, and ensure healthier, modern homes.

Alongside this, a complementary effort focuses on modernising self-built homes from the 1970s to the 1990s to improve living conditions, reduce energy costs, and allow residents to remain in their communities.

Both initiatives are currently underway and form part of Greenland's broader efforts to promote social, economic, and environmental sustainability through renovation of existing buildings rather than new construction.

Research Initiative (Not a Policy)

For further information (in Finnish): Helsinki Research Forum: The growth of office vacancy in the Capital Region continues – over 661,000 square meters of vacant office space (rakli.fi)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

2.4 Norway – Energy Efficiency and Climate Funding Programs

Enova SF, a state-owned enterprise under the Norwegian Ministry of Climate and Environment, promotes energy efficiency and greenhouse gas reductions in existing buildings.

Through various funding programs, Enova supports feasibility studies for reuse, flexibility, and the application of new climate technologies in the construction sector.

The initiative provides financial support for planning, design, and transformation of buildings with a focus on sustainability.

Enova's funding is aimed at improving the energy performance of buildings, with a strong emphasis on making existing structures more adaptable.

By supporting projects that promote energy efficiency and climate measures, Enova is helping municipalities and developers create more sustainable buildings while reducing carbon emissions.

Policy Type: Economic Policy

For further information (in Norwegian): enova.no

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

2.5 Sweden – Tenant-to-Tenant Facilities Sharing Platform

Vakansa is a Swedish digital platform that enables tenants to share and rent out unused space directly to other tenants. The platform offers more than 15 types of facilities and covers over 200,000 square meters across Sweden.

By making underused premises visible and accessible, Vakansa enhances the utilisation rate of existing buildings without necessitating new construction.

The platform enables organisations to share meeting rooms, offices, event spaces, and other facilities, optimising space usage across property portfolios.

The initiative demonstrates how digital tools can support more efficient use of existing buildings, reduce vacancy, and strengthen collaboration between users — contributing to resource efficiency and lowering environmental impact.

Market-Based Organisational Initiative (Not a Policy)

For further information (in Swedish): vakansa.se

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

2.6 Åland – Extending Building Lifespan Through Guidance

The government of Åland is focusing on sustainable maintenance to extend the lifespan of its existing building stock, with nearly 70% of buildings over 30 years old.

As part of Åland's sustainable construction strategy, the initiative provides guidelines for homeowners and construction professionals to improve energy efficiency, water usage, and indoor comfort.

The goal is to reduce maintenance costs, minimise the need for extensive renovations, and preserve the cultural heritage of existing buildings.

Currently under development, the initiative also includes preparing informational materials and resources for private homeowners.

By promoting sustainable practices, the policy encourages building owners to adopt long-term maintenance strategies that enhance building sustainability, reduce the need for resource-intensive renovations, and extend the useful life of buildings.

Policy Type: Information/Organisational Policy

For further information (in Swedish): The guide is part of Åland Strategy for Sustainable Buildings and will be available here, when it is ready: Hållbart byggande (regeringen.ax)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction, picture from Åland

2.7 International – Rightsizing: Experiences with Housing Sharing, Subdivision and Relocation

Aalborg University in Denmark has conducted research on international experiences with housing sharing, subdivision, and relocation of single-family houses.

The project examines how existing detached housing can be adapted to changing demographic needs through subdivision into multiple units, co-housing arrangements, or physical relocation of buildings.

The research highlights policy frameworks, financial models, and planning approaches that enable better utilisation of underused housing stock.

By analysing international best practices, the project provides knowledge that can support municipalities in facilitating rightsizing strategies, allowing residents to remain in their communities while adapting their housing to life-stage changes.

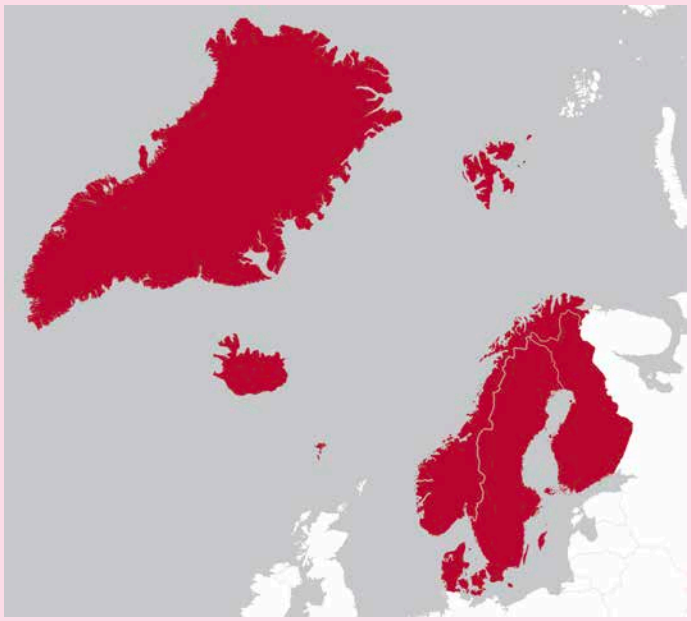
The findings contribute to understanding how subdivision and shared housing models can activate existing square meters, extend building lifespans, and reduce the need for new construction.

Research Initiative (Not a Policy)

For further information: Rightsizing of the single-family-home - Aalborg University's research Portal

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

3. Driving Renovation Instead of Demolition



Cases

3.1 Denmark – Promoting Renovation rather than Demolition

Based on a political agreement from May 2024 ["Tillægsaftale til national strategi om bæredygtigt byggeri"], two initiatives that aim at encouraging renovation over demolition are currently being analysed by the Danish Authority for Social Services and Housing.

Analysis of the possibilities for implementing a scheme that allows municipalities to refuse a permit for the demolition of a building when objective considerations justify its preservation.

Further, it is being investigated whether a scheme can be established under which the building owner is charged a fee for the demolition of these buildings, reflecting the environmental and climate impacts the demolition will cause.

According to the political agreement, a proposal should be submitted to the political level by mid-2026.

Policy Type: Regulatory Policy

For further information (in Danish): Link to political agreement (sm.dk)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

3.2 Denmark – Promoting the Transformation of Existing Buildings

Based on a Danish political agreement from May 2024, it was decided to revise the Danish building regulations.

As part of this revision, it is currently being investigated how to make it easier to utilise existing buildings through conversion, renovation and change of use.

The new rules should be able to replace the rules that apply to new buildings.

To promote renovation rather than demolition, the parties to the agreement agreed to relax energy requirements for transformations of existing buildings, in line with the requirements for major renovations. This change was implemented in mid-2025.

By mid-2026, the parties to the agreement will receive an overview of proposals to promote the renovation of existing buildings with a view to discussing possibilities for promoting renovation.

Policy Type: Regulatory Policy

For further information (in Danish): Foundational Knowledge for the Future Danish Building Regulations (Danish Authority of Social Service and Housing) (sbst.dk)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

3.3 Denmark – City of Copenhagen – Rooftop Housing Initiative for Sustainable City Expansion

As part of a larger initiative to Preserve More buildings, the City of Copenhagen, in collaboration with Viegand Maagøe and NielsensArk, received funds from the Bevar Mere foundation to commission an analysis of the sustainable development of rooftop housing, encouraging the conversion of unused attic spaces and flat roofs in existing buildings into housing units.

This initiative aims to map the potential of existing buildings and, by repurposing them, address housing demand and environmental goals.

Currently, the first step of the project has mapped the potential; the next step is to help property owners and developers navigate planning requirements, such as architectural standards and parking considerations, for rooftop conversions.

While the initiative shows significant potential for adding housing, each project still requires individual permits and approvals.

The guidelines are part of the City of Copenhagen's broader strategic approach to sustainable urban densification, maximising the utilisation of existing infrastructure.

Research Initiative (Not a Policy)

For further information (in Finnish): Helsinki Research Forum: The growth of office vacancy in the Capital Region continues – over 661,000 square meters of vacant office space (rakli.fi)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

3.4 Finland – Driving Renovation Instead of Demolition

A project titled 'Sustainable Development of Modern Building Stock' aims to promote ecological sustainability among municipalities and property owners in their decision-making related to buildings.

It seeks to enhance understanding of how to renovate existing structures into zero-emission buildings that comply with current energy-efficiency standards.

The study indicates that even extensive renovation, conversion, or additional construction of existing buildings consumes fewer natural resources and results in lower carbon dioxide emissions than demolition and new construction.

Evaluating the full impacts of various development options is essential, especially in growing urban areas and regions where the supply of service buildings surpasses the needs of the current and projected population.

Research Initiative (Not a Policy)

For further information (in Finnish): Sustainable Development of the Modern Building Stock – Climate Impacts of Renovation Alternatives and Holistic Valuation of Properties (julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi)

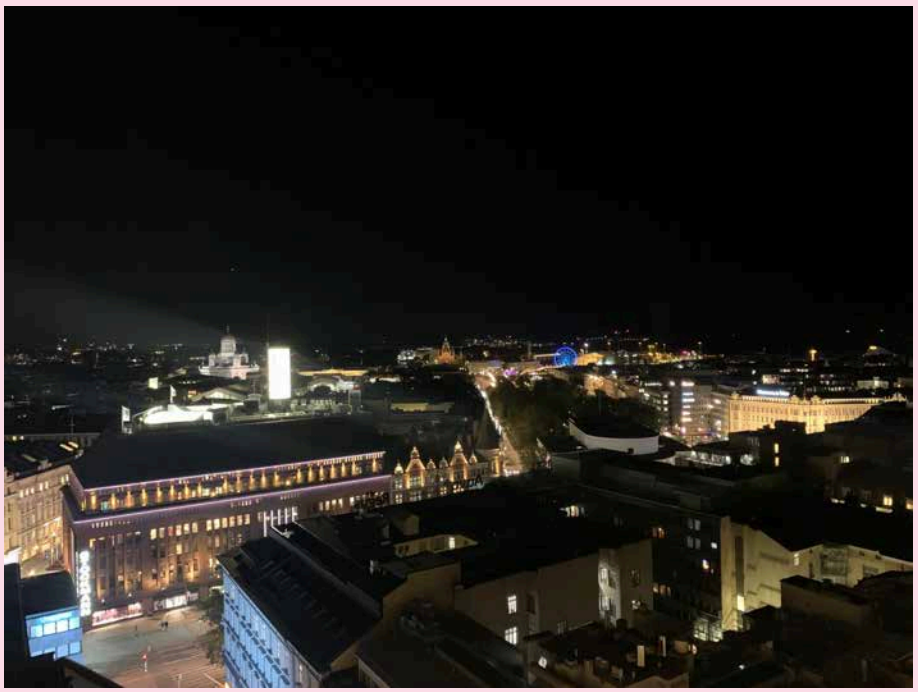


Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

3.5 Iceland - Circular Guidelines for Reuse and Responsible Demolition

Within Iceland's national initiative *Building a Greener Future (Byggjum grænni framtíð)* a collaboration between government authorities and stakeholders in the construction sector, actions 4.9 and 4.10 support the transition towards circular construction by addressing both design and end-of-life stages.

Guidelines for waste prevention and reuse in design (Action 4.9)

Iceland has developed guidelines to support circular design in new construction and renovation. The guidelines promote early-stage planning for waste prevention, reuse, recycling and future disassembly.

The guidelines provides practical methods for integrating life-cycle thinking and increasing the reuse potential of building components.

Guidelines for responsible demolition (Action 4.19)

Guidelines have been developed to promote responsible demolition practices, focusing on pre-demolition assessments, selective demolition and preserving material value. The guidelines support improved handling of materials, including hazardous substances, and explore the use of building condition reports and reuse plans prior to demolition permits.

Practice-driven initiative (Not a Policy)

For further information (in English and Icelandic):
Material and product reuse
Selective demolition
Icelandic Sustainable Construction Roadmap to 2030
Building a Greener Future

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

3.6 Norway – Exemption from Technical Requirements (Planning and Building Act)

Norway has introduced an exemption provision in its Planning and Building Act, allowing municipalities to grant partial or full exemptions from technical requirements for existing buildings.

This policy supports renovation projects by enabling easier adaptation of buildings for new uses, encouraging renovation over demolition and promoting the efficient use of existing buildings.

The building industry has faced challenges, including unpredictable exemption approvals and long approval times. Therefore, the Norwegian Building Authority is working to improve and clarify the process and encourage more widespread use of this provision.

Further, the Norwegian Building Authority is collaborating with the Norwegian Housing Bank to revise loan criteria for renovations of existing buildings for housing.

Policy Type: Regulatory Policy

For further information: Using the Exemption Provision for Existing Buildings – The Norwegian Building Authority (Direktoratet for byggkvalitet) (dibk.no)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

3.7 Sweden – Proposed Amendments to Technical Requirements for Building Alterations

The Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning, Boverket, submitted a legislative proposal in June 2025 to amend the planning and building legislation, focusing on the technical and design requirements for alterations and renovations to buildings.

The aim of the proposal is to significantly reduce technical requirements and associated costs for alterations, making it easier and more cost-effective to adapt existing buildings rather than replace them.

By lowering regulatory barriers for renovations and changes of use, the proposal seeks to support better utilisation of the existing building stock and encourage sustainable reuse.

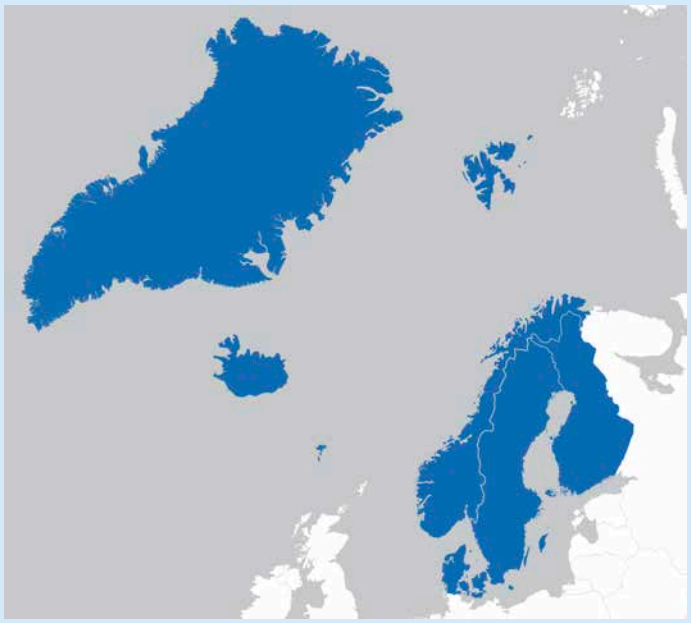
The proposal is currently on referral (remiss) for stakeholder review and comment before potential adoption.

Policy Type: Regulatory Policy

For further information (in Swedish): Proposed Amendments to Technical Requirements for Building Alterations (boverket.se)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

4. Enabling Changed Use Efficiently



Cases

4.1 Denmark – Village Renewal

The purpose of the Danish "village renewal" (Village Renewal under the Danish Social and Housing Authority) is to stimulate village development and make villages more attractive places to live and invest in, for both current and prospective residents.

The framework for village regeneration can be applied to towns with fewer than 4,000 inhabitants and to the open countryside.

The framework can be used, for example, for:

a. Area renewal
b. Renovation of dilapidated private rental housing, owner-occupied and cooperative housing, community centres and businesses located in buildings that contain both housing and commercial activities.
c. Demolition of dilapidated housing and commercial buildings.
d. Conversion of empty commercial premises and empty publicly owned buildings into rental housing.

A state reimbursement of 60% of the municipality's expenses for the above-mentioned village renewal measures is provided to the municipalities that apply. The initiative has been in operation since 2014.

Since then, more than 6,000 redundant homes and vacant commercial buildings have been demolished with financial support from the scheme, and 2,300 homes and local village halls have been renovated. Furthermore, municipalities have used village renewal for 103 area renewal projects.

Policy Type: Economic Policy

For further information (in Danish): Village Renewal (sbst.dk)

4.2 Denmark – Guide to Building Preservation and Transformation (City of Copenhagen)

The City of Copenhagen, in collaboration with Over Byen Arkitekter, has created a step-by-step guide — "Bevar og transformér bygninger til boliger" ("Preserve and Transform Buildings into Housing"). The guide aims to assist developers, consultants, and municipalities in converting existing buildings into residential properties.

It describes the process from identifying suitable buildings and assessing feasibility to navigating planning requirements and implementing transformation projects. The guide addresses regulatory conditions, architectural considerations, heritage considerations, and the importance of early stakeholder dialogue. By clarifying procedures and highlighting best practices, it aims to lower barriers for adaptive reuse.

The initiative seeks to unlock the potential of the existing building stock, create new homes within the urban fabric, preserve cultural identity, and reduce climate impact compared to demolition and new construction.

Policy Type: Information/Organisational Policy

For further information (in Danish): Preserve and transform buildings into housing – A step-by-step guide (kk.dk)

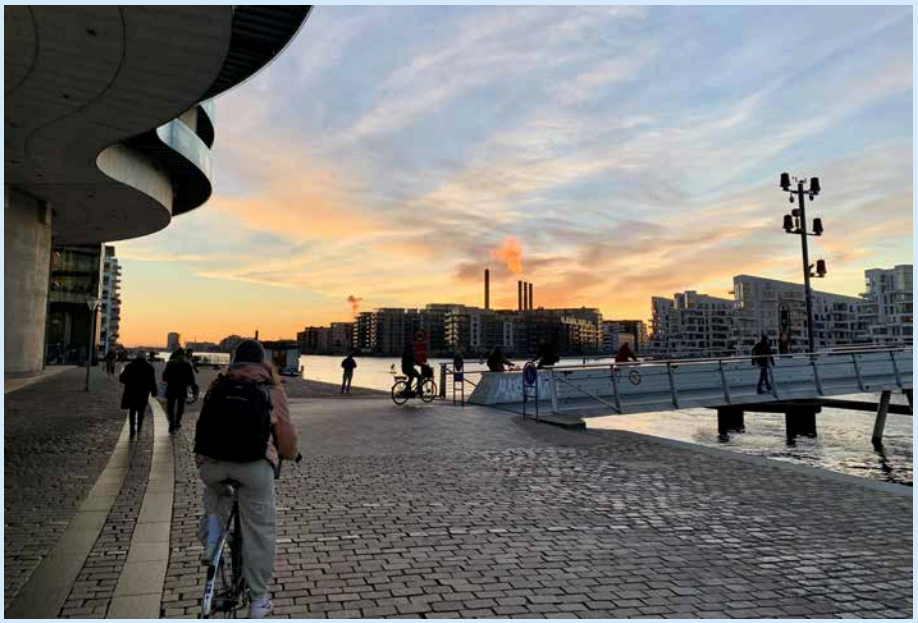


Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

4.3 Denmark – Twenty Transformations – From Various Uses to Housing

The Danish publication *Nye boliger i gamle bygninger* presents 20 realised projects in which existing buildings – including factories, offices, agricultural buildings, public institutions and silos – have been transformed into housing.

The cases illustrate how architectural, cultural-historical, social, environmental and economic values can be activated through adaptive reuse rather than demolition.

Several projects combine preservation with vertical extensions, infill or internal restructuring to meet contemporary housing standards.

Together, the examples demonstrate the significant potential of the existing building stock to deliver new homes while reducing resource use, retaining identity and strengthening local context.

Practice-driven Initiative (Not a Policy)

For further information (in Danish): New homes in old buildings (realdania.dk)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

4.4 Denmark – Construction Case: Area Transformation from Hospital to New Urban Quarter

Hospitalshaven is a large-scale area transformation of a former hospital site in Copenhagen into a new mixed-use urban neighbourhood with housing, shared facilities and green spaces.

Parts of the existing building mass are preserved and adapted, while new volumes are added to create diverse housing types and urban qualities.

The project demonstrates how functionally obsolete institutional buildings can be repositioned as active residential environments, contributing to local regeneration and community life.

By reusing substantial structures and integrating new functions, the development combines heritage considerations with contemporary housing needs and climate-conscious planning.

Practice-driven Initiative (Not a Policy)

For further information (in Danish): Hospitalshaven – the city's new neighborhood! (frederiksberg.dk)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

4.5 Faroe Islands – Practice-Driven and Adaptive Reuse of Buildings

In the Faroe Islands, building reuse is primarily driven by practice-based initiatives, with public and semi-public building owners taking the lead.

While there is currently no formal policy framework for adaptive reuse, initiatives often focus on converting old industrial and public buildings into spaces for cultural and community use.

These initiatives showcase how adaptive reuse can be successfully carried out without a formal policy, though challenges such as limited data on building stock and economic uncertainty remain.

Discussions around better use of existing buildings in the Faroe Islands are gaining momentum within public administration, particularly in the context of climate policy, housing shortages, and land-use efficiency.

Practice-driven initiative (Not a Policy)

For further information (in Danish):
Sjóvinnuhúsið (fish fillet factory → office / campus) (sna.fo)
SALT (salt warehouse → cultural centre) (trap-faeroeerne.lex.dk)
Finsen (municipal school → student housing / youth housing) (sna.fo)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

4.6 Finland – Converting Office Buildings into Housing

As part of the new Construction Act, Finland is encouraging the conversion of office buildings into housing. A notable example is the renovation of an office complex in Helsinki, which has been transformed into student housing.

The conversion includes significant upgrades, such as new insulation, energy-efficient heating, and the addition of common student spaces.

This renovation project helps meet the growing demand for student housing in Helsinki, a city facing increasing urbanisation. By reusing existing office buildings, Finland reduces the environmental impact associated with new construction and promotes sustainable urban growth.

The successful conversion highlights the potential for adaptive reuse to address housing shortages and provide more affordable housing in urban areas.

Practice-driven initiative (Not a Policy)

For further information (in Finnish, abstract in English):
Preconditions for a Change of Use of a Building: Case – Office Building (julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

4.7 Finland – The Construction Act: Facilitating Change of Use

Finland's new Construction Act (2025) simplifies the process of converting existing buildings to new uses, such as transforming office buildings into residential units.

One key aspect is that it makes permanent adaptations of existing buildings easier by allowing owners to repurpose structures, regardless of the existing town plan.

This allows for more flexibility in how buildings can be used.

Another important development is that renovations of buildings can now be carried out using original building methods, enabling traditional construction techniques to be preserved while modernising the buildings.

Practice-driven initiative (Not a Policy)

For further information (in Finnish, abstract in English):
Preconditions for a Change of Use of a Building: Case – Office Building (julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

4.8 Iceland – Creating the Right Conditions to Optimise Buildings for Flexibility

Iceland is working to address regulatory barriers that prevent the change of use for existing buildings. One key challenge is that current building regulations are primarily designed for new construction, making it difficult to repurpose older buildings for new uses.

To overcome this, the government is developing clearer guidelines to enable more flexible reuse, particularly for converting office spaces into residential units.

The initiative aims to simplify the process for developers, reduce the reliance on new construction, and increase the effective use of urban spaces. By addressing these regulatory barriers, the policy will seek to unlock the potential of existing buildings, reduce waste, and promote sustainable urban growth.

It also highlights the need for better coordination between planning and building regulations, encouraging a more circular approach to construction.

Policy Type: Regulatory Policy

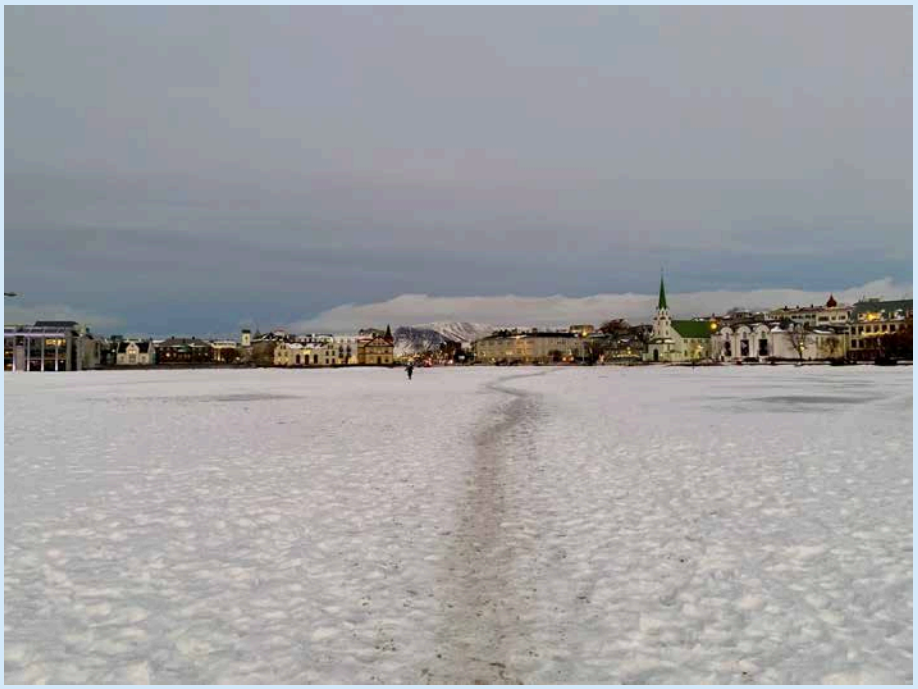


Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

4.9 Norway – Housing in Functionally Redundant Buildings

In Norway, Boliger i funksjonstømte bygg i distriktene ("Housing in Functionally Redundant Buildings in Rural Areas") investigates how vacant or under-used buildings in smaller towns and rural municipalities can be transformed into housing.

Led by Natural State, an Oslo-based strategy agency, in collaboration with Sol-Is Arkitekter and supported by local partners, the project maps opportunities across multiple feasibility studies in partnership with municipalities.

The buildings analysed – including former schools, industrial facilities, and public institutions – are often located near existing services and infrastructure but have lost their original purpose.

The findings explore how these structures can meet local housing needs and illustrate multifunctional solutions that combine residential use with community and commercial functions. The project also identifies practical design approaches and regulatory adjustments that can support more widespread adaptive reuse.

Practice-driven Initiative (Not a Policy)

For further information (in Norwegian): Housing in vacant buildings in rural areas (naturalstate.no)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

4.10 Sweden – Optimising Building Use in Noise-Affected Areas

Sweden is investigating changes to its traffic noise ordinance to allow for residential use in areas exposed to high levels of traffic noise. The initiative focuses on creating "quiet zones" within buildings, with residential spaces located on quieter sides.

This adjustment would enable the development of residential areas in areas previously considered unsuitable due to noise pollution.

By enabling residential development in these areas, Sweden aims to provide more housing options while reducing the environmental impact of new construction.

The adjustments are also part of Sweden's broader strategy to address urban housing shortages, promoting a sustainable approach to urban planning by better utilising existing spaces without requiring additional land development.

Policy Type: Regulatory Policy

For further information (in Swedish):
Optimising Building Use in Noise-Affected Areas (regeringen.se)
Assignment to propose changes to the Traffic Noise Ordinance (Boverket)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

4.11 EU report on Office-to-Housing Conversions

A report from the European Commission provides insights into how converting office buildings into affordable housing can address urban housing shortages and reduce environmental impacts.

The publication includes successful case studies and policy recommendations to help cities and developers repurpose non-residential buildings for housing.

The report includes:

- Case studies from across the EU demonstrate how office buildings can be converted into affordable homes.
- Recommendations for overcoming regulatory, technical, and financial challenges in repurposing buildings.
- Highlights the environmental benefits of reusing existing buildings and supporting the circular economy.

As a follow-up to the study, the European Commission has launched a new project running until 2027, with a focus on affordable, environmentally low-impact housing through more efficient use of the existing building stock.

Research Initiative (Not a Policy)

For further information: Conversion of offices into affordable housing (op.europa.eu)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

5. Renovating for the Future

Cases

5.1 Denmark – Circularly Operated Buildings (CDB)

5.2 Finland – Life-Cycle Performance Requirements for Building Design

5.3 Norway – Promoting Design for Disassembly in Building Regulations

5.4 Norway – Construction Case: Design for Disassembly in Practice

5.5 Sweden – Encouraging Circular Use of Construction Materials

5.1 Denmark – Circularly Operated Buildings (CDB)

Cirkulært Driftede Boliger (CDB) ("Circularly Managed Housing") is a Danish initiative exploring how social housing can be maintained and renovated following circular principles.

Instead of routine replacement, the project emphasises reuse, repair, disassembly, and longer-lasting materials in everyday maintenance practices.

Through pilot projects in existing housing units and shared spaces, maintenance staff test circular methods – such as careful material recovery and reversible construction techniques.

The goal is to integrate circular thinking into standard operational procedures and develop practical knowledge that can be expanded across the housing sector.

Practice-driven Initiative (Not a Policy)

For further information (in Danish): Circularly Managed Housing – About us (cirkulærtdriftedeboliger.dk)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

5.2 Finland – Life-Cycle Performance Requirements for Building Design

Finland's new Construction Act introduces a demand for life-cycle performance for both new and existing buildings. It aims to promote the long service life of buildings by ensuring they are designed for long-term use, making it easier to adapt them to future needs and to reuse building components if the building is dismantled.

The guidance provided,-based on the new demand, outlines the key life-cycle categories – durability, flexibility, and reusability – and their respective indicators to help ensure buildings are designed to last and be adaptable over time. This guidance helps the building sector interpret the new demand for life-cycle performance.

More applicable requirements for building permission procedures are still to be developed.

Policy Type: Regulatory Policy

For further information (in Finnish, abstract in English): Life cycle characteristics in promoting building longevity: Durability, flexibility, and reusability as tools for the circular economy (julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi)

Project on the same topic under the Finnish EKAT project: EKAT – Assessment and implementation of life cycle characteristics in building construction projects (rts.fi)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

5.3 Norway – Promoting Design for Disassembly in Building Regulations

Norway has introduced a requirement in its building regulations that new buildings and major renovations should be designed for disassembly, meaning they should be planned and constructed to facilitate future dismantling.

This approach aims to make it easier to reuse materials and components at the end of a building's life, supporting circular construction practices and reducing waste.

By encouraging design for disassembly, the policy supports Norway's broader commitment to sustainability and a circular economy in the construction sector.

Policy Type: Regulatory Policy

For further information (in Norwegian): Regulations on technical requirements for building works (TEK17) – § 9-5. Construction waste and reuse (dibk.no)

Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

5.4 Norway – Construction Case: Design for Disassembly in Practice

The Hasle Tre Project (The Hasle Timber Project) in Norway is a prime example of design for disassembly in practice. This office building in Oslo is noted as the country's first timber office building designed specifically for disassembly and reuse.

The project uses modular construction components that can be easily disassembled and reused.

The design is flexible, allowing for future changes and adaptations without requiring major structural modifications, making the building more adaptable and sustainable over time.

Although it is a new build, it may also inspire renovation projects.

Practice-driven Initiative (Not a Policy)

For further information: HasleTre – World's first wooden office building designed for disassembly (oslotre.no)

Photo: Dmitry Tkachenko/HasleTre

5.5 Sweden – Encouraging Circular Use of Construction Materials

Sweden's circular economy strategy aims to reduce the environmental impact of the construction and demolition sector by improving the reuse and recycling of construction materials.

The strategy encourages better material traceability, ensuring that materials are easy to separate and sort, and that hazardous substances are limited. It also emphasises the importance of providing information on the materials used in buildings, supporting the safe reuse of components in future projects.

By focusing on the circular use of materials, Sweden seeks to reduce waste, lower carbon emissions, and make the construction industry more sustainable.

This approach aligns with Sweden's broader environmental goals and fosters a more resource-efficient building sector.

Policy Type: Information/Organisational Policies

For further information (in Swedish): Encouraging Circular Use of Construction Materials (regeringen.se)

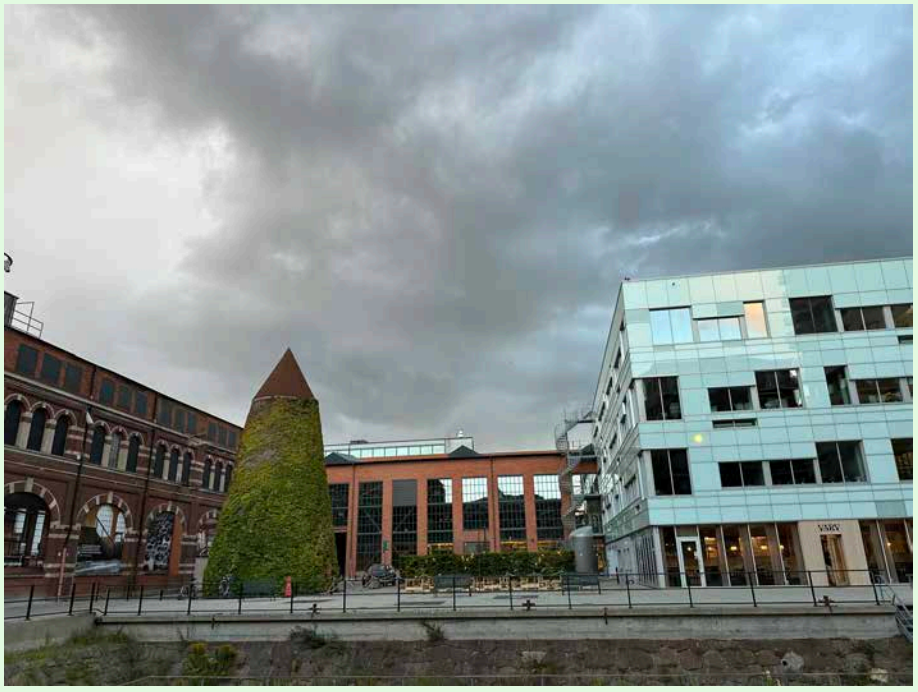


Photo: Nordic Sustainable Construction

Concluding remarks

Improving the use of existing buildings is central to addressing housing needs, reducing emissions, and strengthening resource efficiency.

Across the Nordic region, policy development, practical tools, and built examples show that renovation, reuse, and adaptation are viable and scalable alternatives to some demolition and new construction.

Across the five strategic action areas, the examples from the Nordic region show how authorities and stakeholders are working with a combination of stronger data foundations, enabling regulation, economic incentives, and practice-driven innovation.

Together, these approaches help facilitate a more resource-efficient and climate-conscious development of the built environment.

While solutions must reflect national and local contexts, the shared direction is clear: making better use of existing buildings is both a necessity and an opportunity.

Continued cooperation and knowledge exchange across the Nordic region will be essential to accelerate this transition in the years ahead.

About this publication

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