Collaborative heritage reuse
Enabling strong partnerships

In this Policy Brief, we present recommendations for policy makers, heritage officers, and planners at national and sub-national levels of government, as well as other initiators of adaptive heritage reuse projects. These recommendations aim to support the implementation of adaptive heritage reuse projects in Europe. The recommendations are based on our studies in the OpenHeritage research project and, in particular, our report on the OpenHeritage Observatory Cases.[1]

Adaptive heritage reuse is a complex undertaking and involves various stakeholders. The variety of actors involved presents a challenge as well as an opportunity. NGOs, local communities, public bodies, private investors, heritage professionals and others all have different interests and priorities and it is not easy to reach consensus. At the same time, coming together to form effective and efficient partnerships for adaptive heritage reuse can yield many benefits and create sustainable and vital cultural spaces within our cities and for our communities. We hope to inspire actors to embrace collaborations across fields by providing examples of different partnership models as well as clear and applicable recommendations for their implementation.

[1] The Observatory Cases, including videos and detailed analyses, can be found on the OpenHeritage website. The interactive OpenHeritage Database includes further information on each Observatory Case.

Why partnerships matter

Partnerships between public authorities, civil society organisations, knowledge institutions, financial organisations, and the private sector have the potential to mobilise a variety of skills, knowledge and expertise to address the complex challenges raised by heritage areas. Partnerships between various sectors can bring together different perceptions, insights, working cultures and resources that can make a heritage reuse project stronger and more resilient.

Partnerships for co-designing and co-managing adaptive reuse projects support broader community outreach. Involvement in such cooperations contributes to a sense of empowerment, ownership and belonging. They are instrumental in creating the foundations for the socially sustainable management of heritage sites, and also promote a deeper understanding of meanings and values locally attributed to heritage. Additionally, they can contribute to turning heritage into a catalyst for sustainable area redevelopment: More local knowledge in reuse projects enables better integration into the local economy and promotes the targeting of local needs.

Partnerships allow the sharing of risks and responsibilities and contribute to a process where the aims and methods of reuse projects resonate with affected communities. Many heritage sites require unique and sensitive reuse solutions, conscientious of past and present conflicts and possible future difficulties. Partnerships can be crucial in finding the appropriate mechanisms for the preservation, reuse and maintenance of heritage assets.

Nevertheless, partnerships are not without conflicts. Involving different actors and stakeholders might bring a clash of interests, which requires the development of project-specific expectations, a clear definition of roles and responsibilities, and accountability of all parties. These processes might take longer, and temporary postponements or changes in the project structure might be needed. Partnerships require a great deal of flexibility and adaptability, which is currently minimally addressed in education and training in this field. This policy brief also aims to help fill that gap and provide guidance toward effective collaboration.

The OpenHeritage Project

The OpenHeritage Project 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 in adaptive heritage from 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. An inclusive — *open* — approach to heritage projects is a benefit to the projects themselves, as well as the individual partners working on them.

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Key challenges

Finding the driving force: Even if there is a group of potential partners willing to work towards a common goal, the need remains for at least a few passionate enthusiasts who are the driving force behind the project. It is often a challenge to find those who are ready to step up at the initiation phase, when the rewards are still out of sight.

Harmonising aims and interests: Heritage organisations focus on the preservation and accessibility of heritage sites, municipalities often prioritise the valorisation of heritage in spatial and economic development, while civic partners tend to focus on the direct social impact of access to and involvement with heritage.

Reaching a common understanding on heritage: Expert heritage organisations and public bodies often see their task as preserving the physical integrity of a heritage site in accordance with legal regulations. This adherence to regulations, however, can be an obstacle to civic or private initiatives aiming to adapt heritage sites to the life and needs of modern communities.

Finding an efficient governance structure: Diverse partnerships make governance and management more complicated. The more partners there are, the more difficult it can be to find a governance structure that is inclusive, transparent and efficient in managing the adaptive reuse project and the operation of the site.

Reconciling different operational time frames: While public bodies plan in predetermined cycles, NGOs need the continuous support and activity of their partners to keep their civic network involved. In addition, private partners, based on their interests, often have a different time frame for when they wish to see the impact of their investment, be it social or economic.

Working with different organisational cultures: Private and civic partners operate in different organisational cultures and structures, use different languages, and work at different speeds. This difference can cost resources, especially time.

Coping with power asymmetry: Ideally, a partnership presents a group of equal associates, but in practice, their power is often not shared equally. Paternalistic attitudes by local authorities – often supported by the legal context – or the invisibility of certain civic actors are typical examples of power asymmetry.

Cutting red tape: Overly complicated bureaucratic processes can hinder or prevent joint action or decision making. People involved in adaptive heritage reuse projects often have individual and more specific needs and can't oversee the entire adaptation and management process. Heritage administrators often have preservation and economic obligations. Without a thoughtful approach to these differences, the lack of overlapping agendas can hinder public-private partnerships.

Examples of different partnership models

The 16 OpenHeritage *Observatory Cases* represent a wide spectrum of partnership models. Each model has a different impact on the project outcome. One of the main factors that affects and shapes collaborations is the duration of the partnership. Below we introduce two heritage activation projects that make use of short-term partnership contracts.

Commercial and social cooperative

Largo Residências is a hostel, artist residence and café in a four-floor former ceramic factory building from the late 19th century. The building was rented in 2011 from a private owner for ten years and was renovated to enable its new use. Largo has won grants to support some of its programmes and benefitted from members' expertise and capital contributions in its early stages. The initiators' aim was to channel commercial revenues into cultural and social activities. Heritage protection regulations initially limited the reuse of the building but the conflict was resolved with a flexible approach in the design process. This was, for example, done by creating an "artist in residence" programme which aligned with the original arrangement of the rooms. In Largo Residências, democratic decision-making unites the members of the cooperative, who come from many different backgrounds (e.g. lawyers, economists, architects).

Key challenges: Harmonising aims and interests; Reaching a common understanding on how to deal with heritage.

Solution: Largo Residências emerged in a deprived area of the city, which the municipality declared a priority neighbourhood for development. They launched a so-called BIP/ZIP programme that includes funding for community-initiated interventions. The conflicting interests were all addressed by the concept of the Largo Residências; including those of the private owner and the aims of public institutions to improve the status of the neighbourhood and to protect the heritage values of the buildings. The mix of project initiators enabled the cooperative to create a mix of uses.

Read more about Largo Residências here.

Lease to renovate and maintain

Stará Tržnica (The Old Market Hall) is a historic market building in the centre of Bratislava (Slovakia). The site was closed down in 2008 after years of unsuccessful attempts by the municipality to keep the market alive. In 2013 the hall reopened with a redevelopment plan proposed by the new NGO "Alianca Stará Tržnica" (Old Market Hall Alliance), which brought together expertise from the fields of community organising, event promotion, real estate development, architecture and cultural production. The initiators collectively aimed to create a unique venue, while also keeping the original purpose of the building. They combined the food market with cultural and commercial events, and rented out shops and spaces for dining establishments. The Alliance now creates revenue from rental agreements with third parties and pays its rent to the municipality by maintaining and renovating the building.

Key challenges: Coping with power asymmetry; Cutting red tape; Working with different organisational structures.

Solution: The municipality has one renter (the Old Market Hall Alliance) responsible for maintenance, heritage preservation and management. Small businesses sub-renting the spaces have a fast-acting and flexible partner in the Alliance, which creates the right ecosystem for them and takes away the burden of dealing with regulations.

Read more about Stará Tržnica here.

Examples of different partnership models

Some heritage activation projects become permanent and shape the participating organisations, the relevant legislation and ownership models, as well as structures in the long term. Below we introduce two projects that operate with long-term partnership contracts.

Public-private co-governance

Cascina Roccafranca is a multi-functional community centre located in a former farmstead in Turin's outskirts, which was vacant for 30 years. Today, it is a public asset managed through cooperations between public and civic actors, providing a wide range of social and cultural activities. The foundation running the centre has a board whose members are nominated by the municipality and elected by the 45 member associations. The foundation is nonprofit but enables tenants to develop commercial activities and create a socially impactful ecosystem. Cascina Roccafranca is connected to other community centers within the urban commons network "Neighbourhood Houses". They collaborate with the City Council in the management and regeneration of "urban commons", which in this case mainly refers to buildings.

Key challenges: Finding an efficient governance structure; Coping with power asymmetry.

Solution: The municipality teamed up with stakeholders and developed a combination of functions for the complex. This approach allowed for the municipality to designate special funds for designing the reuse and renovation of buildings. The dialogue during the initiation and design process allowed all parties to gain insights and develop skills and frameworks that resulted in the establishment of the foundation.

Read more about Cascina Roccafranca here.

Shared ownership model

ExRotaprint was founded by two artists who had been renting spaces at a former industrial complex located in Wedding, a traditional working-class district in central Berlin. Together with other tenants, they first formed an association and then established a nonprofit company (ExRotaprint gGmbH) in which the association remained a partner and allowed the company to take over the site and protect it from speculative privatisation. ExRotaprint is the owner of the 10,000 m² building complex, while Stiftung trias and Stiftung Edith Maryon are the owners of the land. The company holds the land in lease, paying the fee into a "solidarity fund" that enables the development of other, similarly designed projects. ExRotaprint puts spaces up for rent to a diverse group of tenants: social projects (e.g. language classes, continued education), productive activities (e.g. production companies that create jobs), and artists, musicians and other creatives. This mix of tenants and functions makes ExRotaprint particularly well integrated in its neighbourhood.

Key challenges: Creating partnership synergy.

Solution: The ExRotaprint community established a long-lasting partnership with the help of the legal instrument of inheritable building rights, allowing the separation of ownership between land and buildings. This construct influences the quality of investments in the building while providing affordable working spaces for a diverse group. Stiftung trias and Stiftung Edith Maryon have contributed to the financing, purchase and renovation of the site and they also act as guardians of the initiative's guiding principles and achievements.

Read more about ExRotaprint here.

Recommendations

How to create engaging partnerships

✪ Involve a diversity of viewpoints:
Partnerships are a good and flexible way to bring missing skills into a project team. Partnerships with multi-disciplinary core teams can react efficiently to changing conditions and bureaucracy gaps.

✪ Keep looking for the right partners:
It might be a challenge to find the right partners, but continuing to search is usually worthwhile. In adaptive heritage reuse, partnerships with local actors and communities are essential and especially important when compared with some other sectors. Cross-sectoral collaborations can also play a significant role: money might come from actors that have nothing to do with heritage. In other words, think outside the box: Imaginative partnerships can also bring new energy and new opportunities to your project.

✪ Engage volunteers:
Partnerships come in all shapes and sizes. Volunteers can bring valuable informal knowledge, open up the project to a wider audience and create a different social ecosystem. Volunteers bring in a lot of valuable support in getting things done, but they can be so much more than that and can truly enrich your project when meaningfully engaged. While volunteers are not a homogeneous group and must not be held to the standards expected of paid employees, they usually bring a lot of enthusiasm and passion to the project.

✪ Define common values and motivations in your team:
Harmonise your vision, identify common goals, clarify the limits of your partnerships and ensure that each partner benefits from the partnership.

✪ Work with civic organisations:
Partnerships between civic organisations and municipalities create a closer connection to the residents and bring their often overlooked voices to the discourse. However, civic partnerships require constant care and public bodies should continue to ensure that their civic partners feel involved and a part of the common mission.

✪ Look at the big picture and enable capacity building:
It is important to include and engage all stakeholders, and listen to their aims and contributions. However, not everyone is an expert and understands all the processes and rules. Make sure to keep an eye on and, at times, highlight the big picture: that way you and your partners can make informed decisions together. Whenever possible, foster capacity building and knowledge sharing so that those with less experience or, for example, less legal education can increase their expertise in adaptive heritage reuse projects and better understand the big picture. None of us were born experts!

✪ Use partnerships as a catalyst to create networks:
A single project or a single partnership might not seem to be worth the effort, but it can be the catalyst for many similar developments. Finding new allies in the neighbourhood, in the district, other districts or even cities and towns can lead to an ever-increasing number of important allies. The more people know about your participative and inclusive work, the better and more elaborated is the framework you can rely on for such projects.

Recommendations

How to manage partnerships and create efficient governance structures

Aim for inclusive governance models: Choose a governance model which supports the efficient cooperation of multiple partners in order to unite efforts and minimise administrative problems. Make sure your governance model allows for the representation of all members.

No need to reinvent the wheel: There are many good practices and projects which are successful in Europe. Learning from their experiences, including how to deal with bottlenecks as well as challenges, can prepare you very well for your own heritage activation process.

Plan the entire process: Partnerships are important and can make your work a lot easier, but they alone do not guarantee success. Cooperation needs to be planned carefully throughout the duration of the project and should go hand in hand with proper organisation and management. Make sure to clearly define roles, expectations, goals and social responsibilities.

Short-term partnerships are a good starting point: Short-term partnerships create an opportunity to test out uses, partnerships and operational models. They are a good start to set up frameworks and can be built on in a participatory development phase. Also think about how to properly end the partnership when the time comes to wrap up the project.

Structural changes need long-term partnerships: Real structural changes in heritage reuse with meaningful investments and long-term activation is only possible with a long-term agreement and partnership. If you think big, search for like-minded partners who share your vision, possess suitable capacities and are ready for serious commitment.

Creating partnership synergy: It requires skills and effort to create a partnership that results in a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. In a synergic partnership, continued joint creativity leads to regular improvement, outperforming what any single person or entity can do.

Create a link between the administration and the end user: Understanding policies, regulations, as well as local practices and dynamics can help identify legal means for reducing unnecessary bureaucratic load, thereby sparing some costs. Connections via a linking party - such as an association of small organisations - can support the process, distribute the risks and work for both partners.

Familiarise yourself with the legal framework *before* diving into partnerships: Various national and sub-national legal and policy frameworks favour different types of organisational forms for cooperation. A little research into regulations and mapping of similar local initiatives will go a long way and help you find the ideal partnership model.

Don't be afraid of technology: Making more use of digital platforms does not have to be limited to the context of a pandemic, but can also extend for the foreseeable future to support and complement in-person meetings and participation and thus strengthen partnerships. When possible and appropriate, employ technologies such as business communication platforms, team collaboration whiteboards or online participation tools.

Imprint

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The highlighted countries are the locations of the OpenHeritage Observatory Cases, some of which are mentioned in detail in this policy brief