

ENHR EAHP Webinar 1#: March 25, 2026

Adaptive Reuse for Affordable Housing- Prospects, Pitfalls and Policy Implications

1. Overview: With rising construction costs, limited development sites, and offices, schools, and other buildings left underused, the adaptive reuse of non-residential buildings offers promise for affordable housing supply in both high-pressure urban markets and small towns and villages. Our webinar began an ENHR conversation on the prospects, pitfalls, and policy implications of scaling up such conversions for affordable housing, as envisioned within the [European Affordable Housing Plan](#). It brought together speakers Gérald Ledent (UC Louvain) and Nicolas Del Canto (University of Liverpool) to share policy relevant findings on adaptive reuse trends in Brussels and London. Gerard van Bortel and Darinka Czischke also presented their Delft University of Technology publication [Adaptive Reuse for Housing](#). Other ENHR members joined the discussion, and we welcome further policy recommendations and open access member publications that focus on this topic as our conversion continues.

2. Summary findings:

- *Adaptive reuse offers good potential to expand housing supply within the existing building stock, and to contribute to sustainable, mixed-use development, and neighbourhood regeneration.*
- *Adaptive reuse projects may involve technical, design, policy, regulatory, insurance and other challenges. They can fall short in quality, safety, affordability, tenure security, energy efficiency, particularly when suddenly enabled by deregulation and driven by the profit motive.*
- *To support the scaling up of adaptive reuse for quality affordable housing:*
 - *conversion-appropriate policy, planning, regulatory and insurance frameworks are recommended, along with affordability quotas, and the involvement of not-for-profit and cooperative actors*
 - *design solutions to technical constraints may require longer lead-times and experimentation funding.*
 - *integrated, place-based strategies that link building-conversion to infrastructure, services, and public spaces are also needed.*

3. Prospects: Our speakers attributed rising policy interest in conversion-based housing projects to **untapped supply potential** linked to changing living patterns, including remote working. Gérald Ledent highlighted a “double crisis” of housing need alongside building vacancy, with vacant office space in Brussels potentially yielding tens of thousands of housing units (more local conversion projects [here](#)). For the Netherlands, Gerard van Bortel cited estimates that adaptive reuse could contribute 10–15% of annual housing production, with escalating housing demand as the primary driver. In adaptive reuse, both speakers saw opportunities for **sustainability** through reduced demolition waste, circular development, and local and cultural heritage preservation. The rise of **collaborative and community-led** adaptive reuse housing projects also offers societal value, especially when delivered in collaboration with municipalities and other local partners. As Darinka Czischke explained, participatory models can enhance **social inclusion and cohesion**. Joining our discussion, ENHR member Jean-Pierre Schaefer stressed the additional social value of conversions to housing in breaking down monofunctional uses of space and contributing to (sustainable) mixed use development.

4. Pitfalls: As risks within adaptive reuse projects, speakers pointed to **financial, legal, and feasibility barriers** posed by planning and building frameworks designed for newbuild. The experimental nature of adaptive reuse for housing, and the technical features of non-residential buildings constitute **design challenges** around layout, thermal comfort, and light access. In adaptive reuse housing projects to date, both in Brussels and further afield, Gérald Ledent described a **bifurcation in quality** characterised by upmarket warehouse and other conversions, and (often temporary) need- driven conversions for young people, asylum seekers and other groups with fewer means.

Nicolas Del Canto highlighted an area of caution in his newly published London-based study, [Planning deregulation and commodification: How is housing precarity structurally encouraged through Permitted Development Rights?](#). While Permitted Development Rights (PDR) boosted office-to-residential conversions over the last decade, many outcomes were **poor quality**, lacked long term affordability requirements, and had **poor local service integration**. Conversion patterns that followed short-term profit opportunities rather than housing need and site suitability, reinforced **spatial inequality and housing precarity**.

Our Q&A, with Sonia Alves, Alice Pittini, Tola Amodu, Glen Bramley and other ENHR members, also flagged tax penalties on vacant offices as a further potential driver of rushed conversions, explored how precarity manifests in the tenancies produced, and underlined the risk of **health impacts**, as evidenced by the UCL study [Health Impacts of Converted Housing](#).

5. Policy implications: For affordable housing policy and programmes at EU, national, regional, or city levels that seek to scale up the adaptive reuse of our members' contributions imply that:

- **Targeted regulatory reform** is needed, including **conversion-specific standards** and streamlined change-of-use procedures
- Deregulation, a driver of some conversion projects, should be accompanied by **strong planning oversight, and retain municipal or other forms of quality control**
- As with new affordable housing constructions, funding and incentives for conversion projects should be linked to **affordability requirements and involvement of non-profit, cooperative, and public housing actors**
- Adaptive reuse housing projects need **urban and spatial integration with transport, services, and public space**.
- Design solutions to technical constraints may require longer lead-times and experimentation funding
- the contributions that adaptive reuse projects can make to sustainable mixed-use development may warrant a '**global economic approach**' that considers these benefits.