

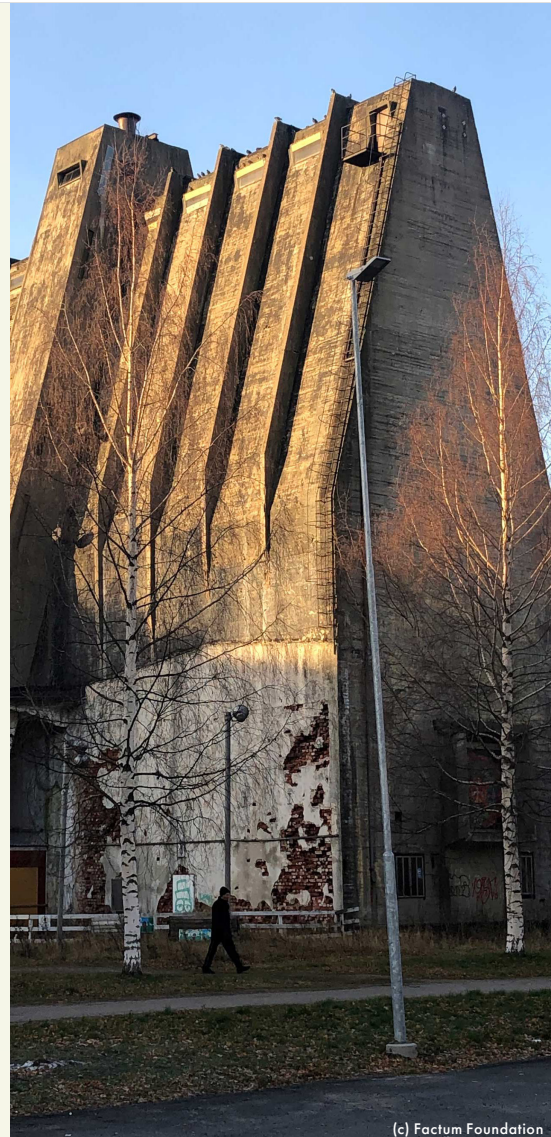


European  
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Living Spaces

CITIES AND REGIONS SHAPING  
THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT  
FOR EVERYONE



(c) Factum Foundation

# Culture taking over a post-industrial building in Oulu

## PEER-LEARNING VISIT REPORT

*Creative Europe*

PUBLISHED IN NOVEMBER 2024



## EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport, and Culture

Directorate D – Culture Creativity and Sport

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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is based on the Living Spaces peer-learning visit that took place between 11 and 13 September 2024, hosted by the Municipality of Oulu, Finland. The peer-learning visit focused on the topic of the adaptive reuse of the [AaltoSiilo](#), a 1930s industrial heritage building in the city's north-western suburbs. This is a significant industrial heritage building, designed by renowned Finnish architect Alvar Aalto. The Toppila Silo is Alvar and Aino Aalto's first industrial site, one of the remaining buildings of the Toppila cellulose factory, commissioned in 1929 and completed in 1931. Its proposed restoration as a cultural space sits within a wider strategic context for Oulu - as a city which is prioritising culture as part of its strategic development. Oulu will be European Capital of Culture in 2026. Cultural infrastructure and long-term sustainable development through culture are therefore strategic priorities for the city. This report provides an overview of key considerations for the active reuse of industrial heritage buildings, including challenges and learning points.

## ABOUT LIVING SPACES

Funded by the Creative Europe programme of the European Union, [Living Spaces - Cities and regions shaping the built environment for everyone](#) (*Living Spaces*) is implemented by [Eurocities](#) and the [Architects' Council of Europe](#).

The action is designed for local and regional authorities to learn how to plan and implement high-quality architectural policies and projects, following up on the work of the EU Member State Expert Group's Report *Towards a shared culture of architecture – Investing in a high-quality living environment for everyone*, published in 2021.

From July 2023 to November 2024, the programme facilitates exchanges among European Union Member States' cities and regions and relevant stakeholders on processes and good practices ensuring a high-quality living environment for everyone.

Architecture has a fundamental impact on people's quality of life. Today, cities and regions must have well-designed buildings and environments, inclusive and considerate of everyone's needs. At the same time, a focus on high-quality architecture by all people and agencies involved will also contribute to sustaining the planet and combating climate change. The quality of our spaces and places is of vital importance to the recovery of Europe, as quality in architecture and our built environment contribute fundamentally to our wellbeing, leaving no one behind.

The activities carried out in the context of *Living Spaces* demonstrate that building and planning for everyone improves cohesion, attractiveness, and the sustainability of our cities and regions.

This is achieved through:

- a [catalogue of 30 good practices](#) from across the European Union, emphasising impacts and transferability from one local context to others.
- [12 onsite peer-learning visits in European cities and regions](#), based on the catalogue of good practices, taking place in 2024 and allowing participants to learn from each other and from experts.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Oulu is the largest city in Northern Finland with over 210.000 inhabitants. Oulu has been selected as the European Capital of Culture 2026, with mission to activate 'Cultural Climate Change', focused on inclusive, sustainable approaches to city development. The name of the city originates from the indigenous Sámi language and translates to melted snow or floodwater. For centuries, the city has built on its distinctive cultural roots to become a key centre for industry, commerce, culture and education. Oulu today is a meeting point for different cultures and a city in transition from its traditional industries such as paper, tar and cellulose (based on resources such as water and forestry), to a knowledge-intensive and creative city with strengths in engineering, technology and knowledge-intensive activities.

The [AaltoSiilo](#) (a cathedral-like concrete silo for wood chip) is one of a number of industrial heritage resources across Oulu, a monument to a different industrial age. However, it is recognised as of particular architectural significance because it is part of the first industrial complex designed (in 1931) by renowned Finnish architect Alvo Aalto and Aino Marsio Aalto: the sulphite cellulose factory Toppila Oy. This silo building operated for several decades but closed in 1985 leaving behind a scarred industrial landscape 2 km from the city centre, isolated and neglected. This is in the context of the Meri-Toppila district, which by the 1990s had a growing residential population, but was struggling with a set of socio-economic challenges, isolated from the rest of the city and facing neglect and marginalisation.

The AaltoSiilo building within the industrial complex has an enduring appeal given its architectural and therefore cultural significance. Its distinctive style and structure give a unique iconography as a 'concrete monolith', symbolic of a different industrial and cultural age. This has ensured that over the decades the AaltoSiilo was viewed by some as a heritage monument worthy of protection and perhaps re-purposing. Whereas, for other people, the AaltoSiilo presented a strategic problem: while of architectural significance and historical and cultural value, it was falling into disrepair, costly to protect and even more expensive to repurpose and bring into active use – e.g. as a cultural building. It was also not a strategic city-wide priority given the more pressing social challenges in the Meri-Toppila district where it is located.

But the AaltoSiilo continued to attract attention for its potential in the city's wider strategic commitment to culture as a foundation for renewal and sustainable development. It also rose to the fore as a potential exemplar of circular architecture and design, bringing back into active use industrial assets rather than over-relying on new buildings. In the 2020 lockdown, [Factum Foundation for Digital Technology in Preservation](#) bought the iconic concrete wood chip silo with a mission to raise funds and reinvent it for a post-industrial era, redefining materiality for the 21st century and the role of industrial heritage in memory, shaping place and cultural identity.

For the Living Spaces peer-learning visit, the AaltoSiilo was positioned as the main case study for a group of 17 European peers selected through a call for participants in the context of Living Spaces. This group was joined by a dynamic community of professionals working in Oulu, including Director of Culture and City Planning Architect, with contributions from across the cultural and education sectors. In addition, the delegation was joined by representatives of the Factum Foundation, who played an active role in discussions and helped clarify the opportunities and challenges for the active renewal of this industrial heritage building. Contributors from the University of Delft and Oslo School of Architecture further enriched

the dialogue and extended the European Dimension. The peer-learning visit was overseen by representatives of the [Architects' Council of Europe](#), the European Commission's [Creative Europe](#) unit and by the cultural and creative industries expert Dr Tom Fleming, Director of [TFCC Europe](#).

The peer-learning activities were placed in the context of Oulu's wider City Strategy to 2030, where culture and the Creative Industries are core priorities. Participants were introduced to the city's overarching strategic priorities for culture, its mission, vision and outline Programme for the European Capital of Culture 2026, and a set of core projects and infrastructure across the city. This included the emergence of the district of Pikisaari as a cultural district (anchored by the Oulu Urban Cultural Centre – an independent creative hub), the role of the University (and in particular the School of Architecture) as an active partner in the city's approach to cultural planning, and the perspectives of different cultural organisations and professionals in co-designing a city where culture is a foundation for both renewal and sustainable development.

This proved to be an enlightening process in the context of the Living Spaces Programme, especially with regard to approaches and tools to plan and implement high-quality architectural policies and projects, following up on the work of the EU Member State Expert Group's 2021 Report [Towards a shared culture of architecture – Investing in a high-quality living environment for everyone](#), and in the context of the [New European Bauhaus](#) initiative and connected European Green Deal, which emphasizes sustainability, aesthetics, and inclusion.

The peer-learning activities in Oulu also draw inspiration from the [2018 Leeuwarden Declaration](#) which calls for the adaptive re-use of the built heritage:<sup>1</sup>

*“Adaptive re-use requires the adoption of a ‘living’ attitude vis-à-vis our built environment; an attitude that considers our built heritage as a man-made landscape that can be re-worked and re-modeled when necessary, starting out from the social, cultural, environmental and economic needs of our time. In so doing, our built heritage can be integrated in a meaningful and creative way into contemporary society and thereby be conserved in a sustainable way for future generations”.*

The adaptive re-use of heritage is also a crucial component of high-quality “Baukultur” – described in the Davos Declaration as: *“a new, adaptive approach to shaping our built environment (...) that is rooted in culture, builds social cohesion, ensures environmental sustainability, and contributes to the health and well-being of all”.*

The peer-learning visit was also relevant to and supportive of the key acknowledgements of the Council Resolution on the [EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026](#), including:

- culture an infinite source of inspiration and innovation, a reflection of humanity and
- aesthetics, our shared language and heritage, and a fundamental part of our identities and communities.
- the role of culture as an integral element in sustainable development and positive societal transformation.
- the growing significance of EU values, including freedom of expression and creation.
- the contribution of the cultural and creative sectors to employment and the EU economy.

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<sup>1</sup> Leeuwarden Declaration- Adaptive re-use of the built heritage: preserving and enhancing the values of our built heritage for future generations. Adopted on 23 November 2018 in Leeuwarden, Netherlands.

The Living Spaces peer-learning visit to Oulu convened both built environment and cultural professionals, meaning that architecture and in particular the heritage value of the AaltoSiilo, were understood in the context of wider cultural strategy and approaches to build an inclusive and sustainable creative industries sector for Oulu and comparable cities across Europe.



# FOCUS OF THE PEER-LEARNING VISIT IN OULU

## Contextual information about Oulu

Oulu is the largest city in Northern Finland with over 210.000 inhabitants (region: 500,000 people). Oulu will be the [European Capital of Culture 2026 \(Oulu2026\)](#). Located by the Gulf of Bothnia and the delta of the Oulu River, Oulu was founded in 1605 by the King Charles IX of Sweden and started its journey as an innovation centre with tar and weatherproof shipping, evolving to a growing hub of modern technology. Oulu today is a major hub for technology and knowledge-intensive industries.

Oulu is a city of three rivers with an open and relatively flat landscape. The city covers a large geographical area of 70 km x 70 km in size. This relatively low-density urban model means that communities are widely spread, often a considerable distance from the city centre. The University is based in a campus 2km outside of the city centre, further contributing to the city's poly-centric and low-density nature, where woodland and parkland are interwoven with the built environment. Oulu's building stock is more recently constructed than many comparable cities across Europe. Less than 4% of the building stock was built before 1940.

The City of Oulu's Cultural Services, Event Services and municipal funding programmes form the core of the cultural ecosystem. The municipality cooperates actively in local and national networks with other Finnish cities, state agencies and civil society. Oulu has a vibrant ecosystem of media arts, with a portfolio of independent art organisations, artists and technologists – many of which are funded / supported by municipality, University of Oulu and Oulu University of Applied Sciences.

Oulu is very active in pan-EU and international networks – further accelerated by the city's successful candidacy to become European Capital of Culture in 2026. Oulu is an active member of Culture Next – the network for European Capitals of Culture (ECOC) candidates; of Eurocities Culture Forum; the Arctic Mayors' Forum for municipal leaders in the Arctic area; International Councils of Museums ICOM; and Lighting Urban Community International (LUCI).



An introduction to Oulu context and cultural strategy. Photo: Living Spaces

[Oulu's City Strategy 2020-30](#), including also the Cultural Strategy, defines the European Capital of Culture in 2026 as one of the core stepping-stones to reach wider strategic goals. As a large development programme, it provides a strategic rationale to transform key cultural assets into drivers of sustainable urban development. This includes industrial heritage which is actively reviewed for its contemporary and future role as cultural infrastructure.

Accordingly to its city strategy, Oulu participates to SDG46, an SDG network for six largest cities in Finland. This works in close cooperation with the Finnish SDG ecosystem, including local and regional authorities, the Prime Minister's Office, Finnish National Commission of Sustainable Development, Ministry of the Environment and stakeholders in the scientific community. The network shares a joint statement with the URBACT Global Goals for Cities. Being the largest city in Arctic Europe creates a responsibility for Oulu as a driving force of the North in culture and creativity, and creating conditions for sustainable urbanisation according to the SDG framework:

*"We wish to see improved use of our cultural resources as diverse and more inclusive content and commenting source on current affairs and problems we're facing in the North. We wish to create diverse options for cultural participation in a large variety of groups and communities"* (Oulu background material prepared by the Municipality of Oulu for the Living Spaces peer-learning visit).

## Analysis of a selection of local projects

The main topic of the peer-learning visit was the potential re-imagination and repurposing of the AaltoSiilo as a centre for cultural activities or – more broadly – as a monument and platform for culture which can provide it with a sustainable future and contribute to the city's wider cultural ecosystem. In addition, participants were also briefed on aspects such as:

- Oulu's strategic priorities and outline programme for European Capital of Culture 2026.
- The role of the University and in particular the School of Architecture in supporting the city's urban renewal and development and in providing a pipeline of expertise and talent into the city's built environment and cultural sectors.
- The role of the independent cultural sector in nurturing an innovative and inclusive approach to cultural production and development including the Oulu Urban Cultural Centre.
- The wider support infrastructure for culture and the creative industries, including the role of Business Oulu.
- Specific projects which prioritise sustainable and innovative approaches to design, architecture and use of materials, including the Arctic Construction Cluster and Circular Economy Cluster.

## The AaltoSiilo in context

Oulu has three objects designed by Alvar Aalto across three different decades:

- In the 1930s, Osakeyhtiö Toppila, sulphite cellulose factory (AaltoSiilo).
- In 1940, internationalizing and unknown in Oulu, Aalto revolutionised the hydropower plant site and made a city centre plan. The Koskikeskus' site plan has largely been implemented.
- 1950-l – by now a well-known and trusted architect, Aalto designed the Typpi Oy building.

The 1931 sulphite cellulose factory Osakeyhtiö Toppila, located in the district Meri-Toppila, has at its heart the distinctive, functional concrete silo designed to hold wood chip. In the 2020 Covid19 lockdown, Factum Foundation for Digital Technology in Preservation bought the concrete silo, relieving the municipality of a costly and seemingly intractable problem: an iconic building situated in a challenging neighbourhood for which an obvious and affordable active re-use was not apparent. The goal now is for the AaltoSiilo to be reinvented for a post-industrial era:

*“redefining materiality for the 21st century and the role of industrial heritage in memory, shaping place and cultural identity”* (context information provided by Oulu Municipality).



The AaltoSiilo [first phase of restoration process by Skene Catling de la Peña Studio](#) has recently been approved by Oulu City Council (02.2024). The plan is to turn a 525 sqm Silo for storing wood chips into a multi-media performance, exhibition space and a rooftop ‘Tar Bar’. Discussions with local relevant public and private actors have also outlined proposals for a new 1150 sqm Research Lab promoting reuse of concrete Spolia ‘waste’ as an architect’s toolkit for sustainable construction. The AaltoSiilo is a concrete building of radical construction, at the cutting edge of engineering tolerance, now nearing its hundredth anniversary. The aim of the proposals is to at least double its lifespan.

The existing AaltoSiilo pushed engineering tolerances to the limit at the time of construction. It is 28-metres high, its ultra-thin, cast-in-situ, steel-reinforced concrete shell is held rigid by fins that punctuate its façade. It is close to one hundred years old and represents the dreams and priorities of the modernists at the beginning of the 20th century. It can also be used to reveal how much priorities have changed in the 21st century. Meri Toppila is a neglected suburb of Oulu. In urgent need of urban regeneration, its transient and low-income population, with high proportions of students, refugees and people living in single occupancy units.

The AaltoSiilo project demonstrates the importance and viability of reusing existing concrete industrial heritage. It provides a 'deconstruction methodology' and structural protocol for the reuse of local concrete 'spolia'.

A central goal of the AaltoSiilo is to create a vibrant place where people want to be and interact. The proposed spaces like public sauna, cafe, rooftop 'Tar Bar' and outdoor amphitheatre provide spaces for social encounters and economic viability.



The Living Spaces peer-learning visit group at AaltoSiilo. Photo: Living Spaces

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION POINTS

*"It was eye-opening to connect with 20 representatives from European countries and see how diverse our challenges are. While some regions focus on preserving structures of cultural or historic value - at times purposely left to deteriorate to a point where demolition will be permitted, others are struggling to reuse buildings that have no inherent value beyond their mere existence. In a time when we can't afford to waste resources, CO2 emissions or energy on demolition and rebuilding, finding new uses for existing buildings has become crucial. Also, as Jane Jacobs highlighted decades ago, 'older buildings provide the spaces needed for innovation and creativity to flourish'"*

Peer-learning participant from Copenhagen, Denmark

This peer-learning visit provided a rich and engaging perspective of the ways Oulu is seeking to position culture as a foundation for sustainable development and as a vector for a more inclusive, innovative and responsible model of urban planning. The dilemmas surrounding the AaltoSiilo and environs provided a set of strategic insights for other cities seeking to renew or reinvent industrial heritage assets as contemporary sites of cultural infrastructure. More widely, participants learned from and exchanged ideas on the role of culture and the creative industries in catalysing urban renewal and reanimating approaches to socio-economic development. This has implications for spatial planning, partnerships and approaches to ethical, responsible and sustainable development.



Photo: Living Spaces

Headline findings and discussion points include:

- ✓ **The role of industrial heritage as a platform for cultural development** – including active re-use of heritage assets to safeguard the future of such industrial heritage.

The AaltoSiilo provided a compelling case study where a building of such symbolic value can support a wider approach to circular design and urban renewal. However, the industrial specificity of the building, as a narrow, tall structure with a thin concrete skin, makes for a complex, challenging and costly regeneration project, with no easy transformation into a cultural building. Participants observed that while the building is of cultural significance given the architect and its radical design and construction, identifying a workable cultural use is not straightforward. Other industrial heritage sites – such as old warehouses and factories – can provide a more straightforward model for re-adaption into cultural use. However, such sites may lack the architectural and structural distinctiveness – both tangibly and intangibly – of the AaltoSiilo.

- ✓ **The social and ethical considerations for culture-led renewal.**

The AaltoSiilo sits to the heart of a relatively deprived and isolated district to the north-west of Oulu city centre. Meri-Toppila is a classic ‘marginalised’ district – to the geographical and sociological periphery of the city. It is a district where there are, arguably, more pressing concerns than the complicated and expensive culture-led revitalisation of an obsolete industrial building. It is therefore imperative that any approach to the transformation of the AaltoSiilo and the broader plans for a spolia R&D centre<sup>2</sup>, are driven by an inclusive and meaningful engagement process with local communities. Feasibility processes should safeguard the wider socio-economic priorities of local people and ensure any regeneration activities for the Siilo have a duty of care for its neighbours. Partnership with the municipality and social and cultural agencies, will be central to ensuring an inclusive and ethical approach to development.

- ✓ **The complexity of cultural partnership, programming and planning.**

Oulu is in the midst of an ambitious and far-reaching programme of cultural transformation. This is catalysed by its forthcoming European Capital of Culture title. In this context, the municipality has a number of priority development projects, most of which have a cultural element. They include the modernisation of the central library, a major development programme in the vicinity of the train station, a new museum of science (as a revitalised Museum of Science), the maturation of Pikisaari as a cultural district, and efforts to build density as a way of reenergising the city centre. The AaltoSiilo needs to be understood in this wider cultural planning context and its sustainable renewal will depend on a strategic complementarity with other core interventions. Moreover, the independent cultural sector, while actively involved in the reimagination of the AaltoSiilo (e.g. through events, site-specific programming etc.), is also seeking ways to consolidate and build a presence in different parts of Oulu. As a low-density city which covers a wide geography, the AaltoSiilo will need to operate as a beacon

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of Spolia—the repurposing of architectural elements from older structures—finds renewed relevance in today's focus on sustainability and circular design.

which delivers value across the city. Participants in the peer-learning visit noted the strategic challenge this poses, drawing on examples from their cities where different projects need to be melded as part of an overarching strategic approach.

✓ **Technical challenges in esoteric industrial heritage settings.**

The AaltoSiilo looks like a simple building, but it is far from it. A radical and innovative construction, pioneering in the use of concrete, it is today a fragile, slender building which will not adapt easily into contemporary re-use. Moreover, the notion of spolia – of essentially upcycling material, while widely understood and valued by architecture professionals, is still a very emergent field for concrete. The proposed R&D centre to explore this can re-establish the AaltoSiilo as a pioneer for industrial innovation, but it is not guaranteed. Participants in the peer-learning visit were keen to learn more about how the notion of spolia converts to concrete, as well as other technical aspects such as approaches to heating, insulation, ventilation, access and permeability across the structure.

✓ **The urgency of protecting an industrial heritage asset vs the complexity of identifying the appropriate investment and partnership mechanisms.**

The AaltoSiilo requires some short-term solutions for its long-term role as a sustainable asset for Oulu, Finland and beyond. This is not a straightforward proposition as the building requires a set of immediate interventions to protect its structural integrity and ensure its longer-term viability. Equally, it is challenging to identify meanwhile cultural uses which can lead to a longer-term development programme. The building has benefitted from considerable remedial interventions, including cleaning (such as of a major pigeon colony) and the staging of pop-up events and performances. However, to get to the point where the building is a water-tight, energy-efficient, adaptable cultural venue, will require a process of detailed feasibility and planning. To get to this point, partners will need to pivot from a programme of interim cultural activities toward a robust strategic masterplan and investment plan for the building. This will necessitate a direct strategic impact study and strategic plan to ensure the building does not only deliver cultural value to the city and to architecture in general, but also social value to local communities.



The AaltoSiilo in September 2024. Photo: Living Spaces



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

The peer-learning visit involved an intensive programme of site visits, walks and presentations. It provided a rich and engaging experience, and participants have expressed high levels of satisfaction in the overall process.

Key takeaways include:

- **The overarching challenge of finding and securing long-term solutions for industrial heritage assets.** Across Europe, every city has a portfolio of industrial heritage assets, but, in a context of limited resources and pressing social issues, it is rarely clear how to prioritise which to renew and redevelop.
- **The balance between leveraging clearly distinctive and compelling assets (e.g. industrial heritage) and the complexity and cost of such interventions.** In a context where smart, energy efficient new-build technologies are pervasive, the critical tipping point to invest in an older industrial building is difficult to define and agree upon.
- **The balance of pragmatic, responsible, sustainable urban planning and development Vs the distinctive and cost-intensive reality of industrial assets.** The AaltoSiilo is clearly an important building which does pose both creative and environmentally innovative opportunities for its renewal. However, it is also a 'difficult building' in a complex and contested urban environment, so it stands as a metaphor for the challenges of inclusive and sustainable urban renewal.
- **The difference between the suburbs and the urban core.** The AaltoSiilo would be an entirely different strategic proposition if it was in a more central or 'upwardly mobile' location. It is not. This renders it a social and cultural conundrum: it is at once a vital and important monument to a special architect working in an innovative material and engineering age, while simultaneously an industrial relic in a non-prime location, with a set of socio-economic challenges in its environs, without a clear value proposition or strategic investment model which drives impact across the city.
- **The reality of all the above: industrial heritage buildings offer a clear link to our past and an opportunity to shape the future.** The exciting challenge involves partners in public and private sectors to knit together fresh solutions which champion the role of heritage assets for future city-making.
- **The importance of genuinely inclusive, intercultural models.** The AaltoSiilo project is but one of the major priorities for Oulu as European Capital of Culture 2026. However, as an independently-owned and driven project, it is at risk of lacking the robust strategic commitments of the city's main projects – e.g. to community engagement and co-design. This is not through a lack of commitment by the Factum Foundation, but through the specific challenges of embedding infrastructure in a wider context without access to other key levers – e.g. in culture, education and social cohesion.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

*“Always think about the WHY of doing things; sometimes doing less or doing nothing can be the best for the outcome; complex thinking may lead to simple solutions; solutions need to be logical and simple to be operated effectively by the users; consider time: we design from what we know today, but tomorrow we will know more and derive our conclusions from what we know then.”*

Peer-learning participant from Rapla, Estonia

The OMC experts group report ‘*Towards a shared culture of architecture*’ highlights:

- the importance of high-quality procedures and solutions for as many people as possible, for everyone, for as long as possible.
- raising awareness about quality, improving spatial knowledge and skills among the populations.
- co-creation at the heart of all decision-making processes concerning the built environment at all governance levels.
- the importance of consistent planning to achieve quality.
- ensuring that public procurement rules and procedures at the national, regional, and local level foster a quality-based approach.

In the city of Oulu, there is an exemplary commitment to the above principles. The challenge and complexity arise in the prioritisation of specific industrial heritage assets for the renewal as key elements of a new-look cultural infrastructure.

Participants of the Living Spaces peer-learning visit to Oulu noted the following, each of which contribute to a set of conclusions and recommendations – in keeping with wider EU approaches to sustainable and inclusive planning, place-making and cultural policy:

### The role of an overarching strategy for culture and heritage



Distinctive industrial heritage buildings which pioneer the use of materials or provide a **platform for radical and disruptive approaches to design and construction**, have a powerful role to play in the re-imagination of the city. Indeed, they signal a future where ‘circular architecture and design’ will be key to sustainable city-making. However, they need to be positioned as part of a **wider strategy for culture** so that they can add value to priorities (such as in community engagement, skills and creative industries), as well as have their own strategic vision and plan. Where owned by an independent partner (as is the case for the AaltoSiilo), **new levels of dialogue and strategic planning** are required to ensure a coordinated development approach.

*Peer-learning participants reflected on how the historical significance of a building does not alone provide the strategic rationale for its renewal: it needs to be sensitively reimagined to deliver relevant value to contemporary social and cultural needs and aspirations.*

*“One notable takeaway was how the industrial site of AaltoSiilo was thoughtfully repurposed while preserving historical integrity and the challenges it faced to find the right functionality. Another takeaway is the importance of integrating the local culture into the urban design, as well as the community involvement when discussing cultural and community-centred design in order to have a successful project on long-term.”*

Peer-learning participant from Bucharest, Romania

## Building inclusive, intercultural approaches to heritage renewal



The AaltoSiilo sits to the heart of a relatively deprived community which is a considerable distance from cultural and social infrastructure such as that in the city centre. Its sustainable future therefore depends on its **relevance to local communities and the ways it generates value and delivers tangible impact** – e.g. in terms of access to social and economic opportunities and senses of confidence and pride. This requires a multi-agency approach – connecting to providers / departments in education, health, economy, environment and more.

*Peer-learning participants reflected on how investment decisions and priorities in terms of the use and focus of heritage renewal need to reflect the needs and aspirations of diverse local communities, with co-design fundamental.*

*“The visit highlighted the vital role of multi-agency collaboration in addressing complex issues like cultural heritage preservation. It stressed the need for creating synergistic frameworks that form the foundation for collaborative efforts and multi-agency policies in cultural heritage management, establishing it as a crucial aspect of the urban commons.”*

Peer-learning participant from Limmasol, Cyprus

## Major cultural programmes and the strategic to commitment of culture as a foundation for city-making, can catalyse positive system-change.



Oulu, as European Capital of Culture (ECoC) in 2026, is committed to **culture to drive forward strategic goals** such as for sustainable development, economic diversification and resilience, and approaches to tackling climate emergency. To deliver long-term impact, the city is also committed to international knowledge exchange and peer review – as reflected in the city’s active participation in European networks and this Living Spaces Programme.

Major interventions such as ECoC can accelerate and strengthen commitment to culture and leverage investment to unlock the potential of heritage assets as part of a sustainable model for urban renewal. But such interventions depend on the **long-term strategic commitment to culture as a foundation for**

**sustainable development** – so that infrastructure projects, heritage renewal activities and boosts to cultural programming deliver step change in the role and impact of culture over the long-term.

*Peer-learning participants reflected on how ECoC and other major programmes can ‘turn the dial’ and ensure greater investment and commitment to culture. However, they also recognised that more important is a consensus- and evidence-based approach to culture which recognises its transversal value to the cohesion, wellbeing and inclusive economic development of cities.*

*“It is very important to have a plan, a structure and a process in which all roles are perfectly clear... I got a lot of small to big impulses that will be helpful in my everyday work but also for the creation of blueprints. When it comes to the transformation of post-industrial buildings that are owned by the state of Berlin with the sub purpose of cultural use.”*

Peer-learning participant from Berlin, Germany

## International peer review plays an important role in testing existing strategic priorities and exploring alternative possibilities



This process also helps **raise awareness of European, national and regional policies and priorities**, including partnership and investment opportunities. Plus, it enables **direct comparison between different local, regional and national approaches**.

The Living Spaces peer-learning visit to Oulu fostered process of dialogue, problem-solving and sharing which has helped reveal a different set of options to those already ‘on the table’. This has helped partners in Oulu to reflect on how they understand the potential of different assets and then to review options. It has also helped participants returning to cities across Europe to reflect on approaches to culture, heritage, urban development and planning with the benefit of a diverse set of perspectives. Moreover, as part of a network, participants are now able to reconnect and share perspectives outside of the visit timetable. Building a diverse community of practice is vital for long-term sustainable urban development.

*Peer-learning participants valued to opportunity to learn together, share expertise and co-design solutions. This included the workshops, sharing sessions and the cultural programme which included an authentic Finnish sauna experience.*

*“The visit provided a valuable opportunity to build a network and exchange insights, fostering mutual learning and collaboration among participants. Understanding a region very distant from mine, yet facing similar challenges: despite being geographically distant, the visited region shares many of the same challenges, offering a fresh perspective on common issues and possible solutions”.*

Peer-learning participant from San Donato Milanese, Italy

*"This was my first introduction to EU policies and initiatives related to architecture and the built environment. It highlighted how important large-scale guidelines can be in influencing regional projects and the professionals working on them. I believe this effort to bridge the gap and raise awareness was a great initiative."*

Peer-learning participant from Lagadas, Greece



Photos: Living Spaces

## LINKS & RESOURCES

Find out more about Oulu

[Website of the city of Oulu](#)

[Oulu European Capital of Culture 2026](#)

Find out more about the AaltoSiilo

[Website dedicated to the AaltoSiilo](#)

[AaltoSiilo in the Living Spaces catalogue of good practices](#)

EU policies and programmes on architecture

[European Commission 2018 New European Agenda for Culture](#)

[European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage](#)

[Leeuwarden declaration on 'Adaptive re-use of the built heritage: Preserving and Enhancing the values of our built heritage for future generations'](#)

Davos declaration '[Towards a high-quality Baukultur for Europe](#)' 2018

[Davos Baukultur Quality System](#). Eight criteria for a high-quality Baukultur, 2021

European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, [\*Towards a shared culture of architecture – Investing in a high-quality living environment for everyone\*](#) – Report of the OMC (Open Method of Coordination) group of EU Member State experts, 2021, Publications Office of the European Union, 2021

European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, [\*Do your own evaluation of how to reach quality goals in architecture and the built environment for everyone\*](#), Publications Office of the European Union, 2021

[New European Bauhaus website](#)

[Living Spaces website](#)

Statements and publications by the Architects' Council of Europe

Booklet [High-quality Architecture and Built Environment: A Political Goal](#)

[Statement Designing for a Circular Economy](#)

[Statement A sustainable, fair and beautiful built environment to address the climate and biodiversity crisis](#)

[Statement For Affordable and Quality Housing](#)

[Statement Achieving quality in the built environment](#)

[Manifesto on the New European Bauhaus](#)

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ISBN 978-92-68-20362-0

doi: 10.2766/697483

NC-05-24-666-EN-N





Publications Office  
of the European Union