RECLAIMING VACANT SPACES TO TACKLE HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS CRISES IN EUROPE

FEANTSA

Laudes Foundation

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TABLE OF FIGURES

Reclaiming vacant spaces to tackle housing and homelessness crises in Europe

Across Europe, millions of vacant spaces, whether residential, commercial, or other types of stand empty, when in fact, some could be repurposed to address pressing social challenges such as housing shortages and homelessness. Many cities face increasing populations, housing crises, and growing demand for affordable housing, yet vacant spaces persist, representing an untapped resource that could offer viable solutions to these problems. This issue is particularly relevant in the EU context, as the Affordable Housing Plan is being prepared as part of broader efforts to boost affordable housing supply. Additionally, the Jørgensen mission letter explicitly highlighted the inefficient use of the existing building stock as a challenge that needs to be addressed.

However, it is important to recognize that not all vacant spaces are suitable for repurposing. Factors such as building condition, location, zoning regulations, and structural limitations must all be considered in determining the potential of a given property.

In addition, any effort to address homelessness through vacancy must begin with a thorough assessment of local needs and the suitability of available spaces. Households vary widely in terms of the type of housing they need. Without understanding these requirements to ensure that repurposed spaces meet those needs, any attempts to repurpose vacant spaces could risk exacerbating issues such as housing affordability, overcrowding, or displacement.

This report seeks to provide a comprehensive framework for identifying vacant properties that have the potential to be repurposed for housing use. By examining the various types of vacant spaces across Europe and considering both the challenges and opportunities they present, we hope to create a more inclusive and effective approach to transforming vacant properties into much-needed homes.

About FEANTSA

FEANTSA, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless, is committed to tackling homelessness and ensuring the right to adequate housing for all.

As Europe's unique coalition of non-governmental organisations focused on homelessness, FEANTSA advocates for policies that address homelessness, housing exclusion and affordability. Through this report, FEANTSA aims to highlight the potentil of repurposing existing building stock to address the pressing issue of unmet housing needs and sufficiency.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Vacant spaces, whether residential, commercial, or institutional, represent a significant, underutilized resource in the fight against housing exclusion and homelessness in Europe. Currently, over 47.5 million homes across the EU remain vacant, while 1.27 million people face homelessness (FEANTSA 2024). As housing needs continue to grow, particularly among vulnerable populations, addressing vacancy offers an opportunity to provide sustainable and affordable housing solutions.

This report explores the multifaceted nature of vacancy, examining trends across Europe and highlighting the challenges and opportunities linked to the reuse of vacant properties. It maps different categories of vacant spaces, including commercial buildings, residential units, and public or religious properties and presents successful examples of their transformation into housing solutions. For example, the Bethléem project in Belgium has repurposed underutilized church properties, providing housing for vulnerable groups. Similarly, the Grand Parade project in Cork, Ireland, has successfully converted a vacant commercial building into a mixed-use development, offering permanent homes for young people, families, and individuals with support needs.

The analysis emphasizes that not all vacant spaces are immediately suitable for reuse. Factors such as location, condition, legal constraints or ownership significantly influence the potential for repurposing.

In high-vacancy countries like Croatia (40%), Bulgaria (39%), and Greece (35%), empty buildings often remain unused due to outdated infrastructure, legal barriers or lack of data.

Furthermore, the report underlines the importance of linking vacancy strategies with a clear understanding of local housing needs to ensure that repurposed spaces effectively address community demands. 54% of vacancies in the EU are older buildings in need of retrofitting, presenting an opportunity to combine housing needs with climate and sustainability goals.

Addressing vacancy is not a one-size-fits-all solution, but with the right tools and approaches, it can become a crucial part of a broader strategy to combat housing exclusion and ensure the right to housing for all.

Effectively repurposing vacant spaces requires:

- Better data tracking and vacancy registries to identify suitable properties, combined with tailored policy solutions that reflect the unique needs of local populations.
- Prioritizing homeless households and other vulnerable groups in the allocation of repurposed housing, ensuring that these efforts directly contribute to addressing housing exclusion.
- Financing repurposing efforts to support affordable conversions and retrofitting, with a focus on ensuring that repurposed properties remain affordable for low-income households through careful planning, including rent controls, subsidies and long-term social housing commitments.

CHAPTER	INCLUDES
CHAPTER 1: LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND VACANCY TRENDS ACROSS EUROPE	▸ Overview of vacancy rates in Europe. ▸ Analysis of legal tools (tax incentives, grants, requisitions) to mobilize vacant properties. ▸ Country-specific policies and their effectiveness.
CHAPTER 2: TYPOLOGIES OF VACANT BUILDINGS AND POTENTIAL OF REPURPOSING	▸ Categories of vacant spaces (residential, commercial, religious, public). ▸ Challenges and opportunities for repurposing each type.
CHAPTER 3: IDENTIFYING HOUSING NEEDS AND THE ROLE OF VACANT SPACES TO ADDRESS THEM	▸ Distinction between housing "need" and "demand." ▸ Methodologies for assessing housing needs across Europe. ▸ Recommendations for aligning vacancy strategies with local needs.
CHAPTER 4: GUIDANCE ON CONVERSION	▸ Criteria for selecting properties suitable for repurposing. ▸ Roles of stakeholders (public, private, NGOs). ▸ Strategies for short-term vs. long-term use and ensuring affordability.

CHAPTER
I

Legal frameworks and vacancy trends across Europe

Across Europe, various policies and strategies are enabling the repurposing of vacant spaces into homes. With over 1.27 million people experiencing homelessness[1], more than 19 million living in inadequate housing[2], and 8.7% of the population overburdened by housing costs[3], leveraging these frameworks could help alleviate housing shortages. When combined with other housing production methods, repurposing can help meet the growing demand for affordable and secure housing while addressing severe housing exclusion across the EU.

a. Contexts and legal frameworks

Vacant spaces across Europe represent a significant untapped resource in the fight against housing shortages and homelessness. However, to effectively address these issues, it is essential to first understand the contexts and legal frameworks that govern vacancy. According to the report "Tools to Deal with Vacant Housing" by Housing Europe[4], governments and local authorities have a range of tools at their disposal to incentivize the reuse of vacant properties. In the context of fighting against homelessness and housing exclusion some of those tools appear to be more successful than others.

See table on the following page

	ADVANTAGES
TAX / REGULATORY RELIEFS	► **Incentivizes owners** to put vacant properties back into use by reducing their tax burden.
PUBLIC GRANTS	► Provides **financial support** for the renovation and repurposing of vacant properties.
PUBLIC LOANS	► Offers **low-interest financing** for the renovation of vacant properties, making it easier for owners to invest.
ONE STOP SHOP	► **Eases the process** of repurposing vacant properties by **centralizing** permits, funding, and support services.
MOBILISE VACANT UNITS FOR TEMPORARY OCCUPATION	► **Provides immediate housing solutions** for people experiencing homelessness or in urgent housing need. Can serve as a transitional s**tep toward permanent housing**, especially when paired with **support services**.
SPECIALIST PUBLIC AGENCIES	► **Centralizes expertise and resources** for repurposing vacant properties. ► **Can (help) coordinate large-scale projects** that address homelessness and housing exclusion effectively.
PLANS/BUDGET	► Provides a **clear roadmap** for addressing vacancy. ► **Ensures allocated funding** for projects, making it easier to scale solutions.
INCREASED TAX LIABILITIES / FINES	► Penalizes owners who keep properties vacant, **encouraging them to rent or sell**. ► Revenue from fines can be used to fund the renovation of derelict properties.
REQUISITIONS	► Puts vacant properties into **public management**, ensuring they are used to address housing needs. ► Can provide immediate housing solutions in high-demand areas.

Fig 1: Legal tools and their impacts on homelessness and housing exclusion

DISADVANTAGES

- **Requires effective monitoring and enforcement**, which can be resource- intensive.
- **Owners may bypass the system** (for example, by falsely claiming occupancy) to avoid taxes, reducing the tool's effectiveness.

- **Risks benefiting property owners more than tenants**, as owners may use grants to increase property values without passing savings to renters.
- **May lead to renovictions and ultimately gentrification** by displacing lower-income households

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- **Requires upfront funds**, which may be a barrier for some property owners.
- If not carefully managed, loans may favour larger developers over smaller community projects.

- Requires significant **upfront investment** in administrative infrastructure.

- **Not a long-term solution;** without adequate support, tenants may remain in temporary housing indefinitely.
- **Risks creating dependency on temporary solutions** rather than addressing root causes of homelessness and housing exclusion.

- **Requires strong political support and funding** to be effective.

- Without proper implementation, **plans may remain theoretical and fail to deliver results**.
- **Budget constraints** may limit the scope of initiatives.

- **Owners with speculative motives may simply pay fines** rather than renting or selling, leaving properties empty.

- **May face public resistance** or lack of approval, especially if perceived as overreach.
- Some local authorities may refuse to apply requisition laws, limiting their effectiveness.

To better understand how various European countries deal with vacancy, we reviewed national policies, strategies and legislative measures targeting vacant dwellings or buildings. The following tables summarize key measures identified through desk research of publicly available national documents, reports and publications.

	SUPPORTIVE APPROACH			
COUNTRY	TAX/ REGULATORY RELIEFS	PLANS AND BUDGET	PUBLIC GRANTS	
AUSTRIA				
BELGIUM				
BULGARIA				
CROATIA	X			
CYPRUS	X			
CZECHIA				
DENMARK				
ESTONIA				
FRANCE	X	X		
GERMANY				
GREECE			X	
HUNGARY				
IRELAND		X	X	
ITALY	X			
LATVIA				
LITHUANIA				
LUXEMBOURG	X			
MALTA				
NETHERLANDS		X		
NORWAY				
POLAND		X		
PORTUGAL		X		
ROMANIA				
SLOVAKIA				
SPAIN				
SWEDEN				
SWITZERLAND		X		
UK				

Fig 2: Summarized table showing measures used in different European countries to mobilize vacant stock

	SUPPORTIVE APPROACH		PUNITIVE APPROACH	
	PUBLIC LOANS	SPECIALIST PUBLIC AGENCIES	INCREASED TAX LIABILITIES / FINES	REQUISITIONS
			X	
			X	X
				X
				X
				X
		X	X	
			X	X
	X		X	
			X	
		X	X	X
			X	X
			X	X
	X			
		X		X

	SUPPORTIVE APPROACH
AUSTRIA	
BELGIUM	In Flanders, under the "Sociaal beheersrecht" withdraw vacant units and place them under the management of social housing organization to repair them and rent them to vulnerable households. In Wallonia, owners of empty dwellings are obliged to put them on the rental market. Otherwise, they face a fine of between 500 and 12,500 € per year per unoccupied house/flat.[7]The fines perceived feed a fund that aims to renovate dwellings unfit for housing.[8]The local authority can also put the property under their responsibility. They do the renovation work, if needed, and then rent them through a social rental agency. For 9 years, the owner has no say on their property. If the owner pays back the renovation costs and find a tenant, they can get their property back sooner. In Brussels region, local authorities have adopted an approach combining both supportive and regulatory tools. The region supports local municipalities in identifying and addressing empty properties through technical assistance, legal advice and funding for renovation via the Regional Housing Fund. Additionally, Brussels enforces a vacancy tax to discourage long-term inoccupation and has introduced the possibility of requisitioning vacant buildings for social purposes.
BULGARIA	There are no policies in place to tackle the vacancy issue for now. The main issues lay in the state of the rental market: it is "cheap" to own a home, but owners aren't incentivized to rent them.[9]
CROATIA	In shrinking rural areas of Croatia, several municipalities such as Legrad, Glina or Vrbovec have launched programmes selling unused dwellings for a symbolic price of 1 kuna (approximately €0.13) to encourage repopulation and housing reuse. These initiatives are locally implemented but align with broader national objectives to revitalize depopulated regions. Buyers are required live in the property and invest in necessary repairs. [10] [11]
CYPRUS	In late 2023, the Renovate to Rent scheme was introduced. The details are set to be published in the beginning of 2024. The aim is to grant financial incentives to improve and subsequently rent out currently unused houses at lower rates.
CZECHIA	
DENMARK	As of 2023, housing associations must lease 85% of their vacant social housing to households with an income of up to EUR 44,035 for single-person households and EUR 48,625 for multi-person households (according to 2023 income thresholds).[14] In Denmark, there is a residence requirement for most homes. This means that if an owner moves out of their property and do not wish to sell it, they must rent it out. Holiday homes are exempt. If a home is empty more than 6 weeks, the local authority appoints a tenant to move in.[15]
ESTONIA	With the growing phenomena of shrinkage in Estonia, many apartments and single-family houses are left empty. The government through the Ministry of Finance put in place a measure to help municipalities acquire and demolish vacant buildings. Owners can be compensated and moved into another dwelling that is in a better state or that could be renovated by the state. [16] [17] Thanks to the Privatisation of Dwellings Act, privately owned dwellings can be transferred to the State to facilitate the demolition.[18]

Fig 3: Detailed table describing measures used in different European countries to mobilize vacant stock

PUNITIVE APPROACH

A tax has been introduced in 3 municipalities in 2023: Salzburg, Styria, and Tyrol. The conditions of determining vacancy are variable: for Tyrol it is when an apartment is vacant for more than 6 consecutive months. For Salzburg and Styria, an apartment is considered vacant after more than 26 weeks (not necessarily consecutive).[5]In Styria and Salzburg, the vacancy is ruled based on the central population register so it is easy to bypass it.[6]

From the end of 2023, properties with unknown owners fell into the possession of the state. This marked the end of a ten year period during which owners were invited to come forward. The state could then hand them to state institutions or to municipalities. If State Instutions or municpalities do not take the properties, they will be auctioned off. [12 13]

	SUPPORTIVE APPROACH
FRANCE	The ELAN law (2018) offers a financial **bonus to constructors transforming offices into housing**. The "préfet" can requisition flats that were left empty for more than 12 months in areas with tight housing market.[19] The national Zero Vacant Housing plan[20] offers municipalities tools to understand vacancy on their territories.
GERMANY	Some municipalities such as Karlsruhe support the mobilization of vacant properties by partnering with private owners or real estate actors to acquire and repurpose vacant buildings into affordable housing units.[23]
GREECE	In the hope to return some of the vacant dwellings onto the market, the government is thinking about measures to put in place such as modifying the "Golden Visa" to increase the amount of investment threshold. This program offers the possibility to live in Greece and travel freely in Europe after investing in real estate. This program has been widely criticized for inflating housing prices and prioritizing investor interests over local housing needs. [27 28 29] Tax authorities is also looking for more thorough checks to determine which properties are vacant. [30 31]
IRELAND	The governmental "Vacant Homes Action Plan 2023 – 2026" aims to bring empty properties back to use. The **"Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant"** is available to finance the refurbishment of properties to use as a primary residence (from 30,000 € up to 50,000 €). The **"Buy and Renew"** scheme provide Local Authorities support for the purchase and renovation of vacant properties to turn them into social housing. The **Rent-a-Room** relief scheme is a program aimed at underoccupied properties. For owners or just occupiers of those properties can earn up €14,000 per year tax-free by renting a room to a university student. The **Voids Programme** under the Housing for All action provides local authority with exchequer fundings to refurbish and re-let empty social housing homes.[34] The **Living City Initiative** is a tax incentive for certain properties in Special Regeneration Areas (SRA) in historic centres of selected cities. Landlords or owners-occupiers can refurbish and convert commercial properties into housing. The owners must pay upfront, and they receive up to 200,000€ in tax-relief on the course of 7 years.[35] The **Repair and Lease (RLS)** scheme provides interest-free loans to help bring back vacant derelict houses back into use. In exchange, the owner must lease the property to the Local Authority for social housing for at least 5 years. The value of the loan is up to 80,000€ but it is not sufficient to completely cover the costs of the renovation. Also, the scheme provides social housing units only on a short period: after the 5 years pass, there is no obligation for the owner to continue renting the property to the Local Authority.[36]
ITALY	To revitalize shrinking towns, many Italian municipalities have launched the 1€ house scheme. Under this initiative, derelict properties are sold for the symbolic price of one euro.[37] Usually, properties have been donated by previous owners who no longer wished to maintain them.[4] Purchasers are required to commit to renovating the property, typically within a year of acquisition. Municipalities often demand a detailed refurbishment plan, a deposit (usually between €1,000 and €5,000) and proof that the buyer can cover the renovation costs. The homes are generally intended for owner-occupiers or residential use though requirements vary by location. [38 39] The scheme does not typically prioritize affordability or social use. Without safeguards, such initiatives risk gentrifying rural areas or turning them into tourist-only areas.

Fig 3: Detailed table describing measures used in different European countries to mobilize vacant stock

PUNITIVE APPROACH

In the context of a **national plan of fight against vacancy**, owners of unoccupied and unfurnished healthy dwellings must **pay a tax depending on the duration of vacancy** (the rate depends on the location).[21]

For second residences, owners must pay a tax to their local authority. The amount depends on the location and the cadastral rental value.[22]

Several cities apply the Zweckentfremdungsverbot, a regulation that prohibits leaving dwellings vacant without authorization.[24]

In Berlin, a property is considered vacant if unoccupied for over 3 months without valid justification, and owners risk fines up to 500,000€. The city may also appoint an administrator to rent out the dwelling on the owner's behalf.[25]

In the federal state of Hesse, a 2024 law introduces a new vacancy restriction with penalties up to 500,000€ to address housing shortages.[26]

Other policies have been considered such as:

- Limiting holiday lets to promote long term renters
- Enhance the "Renovate-Rent" programme that is offering incentives to owners of empty properties to help them put their apartments on the market
- Launching tender process for public buildings to be converted into homes[32]

Properties that have been undeclared to the municipal census for more than 8 years are passed over to the government ownership.[33]

A **Vacant Home Tax** was introduced in 2023 for **properties that are used less than 30 days as a dwelling on a 12-month period** (the tax is three times the basic rate of Local Property Tax applying to the property)

	SUPPORTIVE APPROACH
LUXEMBOURG	Under the "Empty Property Scheme", owners perceive increased benefits if they put their property on the social housing market: the state exempts three quarters of the rent from tax.[40]
NETHERLANDS	Since September 2022, owners must report the vacancy of their houses if it remains unoccupied for more than 6 months. (If they don't report it, they face a fine of 9,000€ for professional landlords and 4,500 € for other offenders).[42] The owner then has to offer the municipality a plan on how to make this property available on the market. If they fail to do so, after 12 months, the municipality will appoint a tenant to the house.[43]
POLAND	Warsaw city hall has a specific budget allocated to the renovation of vacant municipal buildings.[46]
PORTUGAL	Under the plan "More Housing" law voted in 2023 a coercive leasing measure was put in place. Owners of apartment that have been vacant for more than 2 years (except in low density areas) must put them back into the market for a price up to 30% above rent medium for the specific type of house in the specific parish. If they refuse to do so, the municipality has the option to lease it directly or through the Institute for Housing and Urban Rehabilitation (IHUR). [47] [48]
SPAIN	
SWEDEN	
SWITZERLAND	At the municipal level, cities such as Geneva and Zurich actively purchase and convert underused or vacant buildings into social housing using dedicated public funds.[54] Federal support also exists for cooperative and non-profit housing providers who may acquire and renovate empty properties.[55]
UK	Councils can take Empty Dwelling Management Orders on properties that are unoccupied for more than 6 months. The council brings the property back into use. They do not own the property. It can last from 12 months up to 21 years.[57] The problem is that this solution is not used as frequently as it could be. [58] [59]

Fig 3: Detailed table describing measures used in different European countries to mobilize vacant stock

	PUNITIVE APPROACH
	Since 2008, a law has been put in place to allow communes to raise taxes on homes that have been unoccupied for 18 months (only in place in 6 communes). Another annual tax has been implemented since 2023, the initial amount is 3,000€ with an increase of 900€ per year if the property stays empty for more than 6 months.[41]
	Since 2010, the **Squatting and Emptiness law** prohibits squatting. In return, anti- squatting opportunities emerged. **"Anti-kraak"** or anti squat in English, is a **government-sanctioned, agency- controlled system that rents out abandoned buildings** (usually old public building or offices) for very little money to prevent squatters from moving in. The temporary renters are given 2 weeks' notice before having to vacate without knowing where they will live next. [44 45]
	Under Article 29 of Basic Housing Law, vacant dwellings for at least one year can be subjected to tax imposed by the municipalities. [49 50]
	In 2023, the new housing law "Ley de Vivienda" introduced a new tax on properties that have been vacant for more than 2 years. If the property has been left empty for two years, the surcharge on the property tax may amount to 50%, while it may reach 100% when the owner has more than three unoccupied properties. The top fine of 150% will be applied to owners of two or more properties for residential use that are unoccupied in the same municipal area. [51 52] Since mid-2023, in 14 municipalities, owners of vacant properties must either sell their property to the municipality or put them on the rental market. Initially, 45 municipalities had been identified by the government to put this in place, but the others refused.[53]
	No national-level punitive measures exist to compel private owners to reuse vacant dwellings. Municipalities do not have the legal authority to enforce occupancy or force rental of empty homes.
	There is no national vacancy tax, but the Canton of Geneva has proposed a progressive tax on unoccupied dwellings left vacant for more than 6 months and overpriced compared to market norms.[56]
	The bedroom tax is a policy that reduces the amount of housing benefit you receive based on the number of spare rooms you have in your house.[60] However, this measure has faced significant criticism for disproportionately affecting low-income households. [61 62] Councils can use Compulsory Purchase Order when owners refuse to put properties back onto the market in an area where there is housing need. The property is then sold and monitored to ensure that it is used.[63] Stamp duty is a tax paid for every acquisition of land or building (except for first time buyers of houses worth less than 425,000 £).

While the table highlights a wide range of measures adopted across Europe to address vacancy, such as taxes, fines, or incentives, **it tells us little about their actual effectiveness**. There is significant variation in how these efforts are implemented, and particularly to which extent they are **linked to strategies for addressing housing needs**, especially the **most urgent unmet needs** like homelessness or inadequate housing.

The success in incentivizing owners to put back their vacant properties on the rental market lies first and foremost in the adequate assessment of the nature and reasons of vacancy rates in an area. This is a precondition for dealing with vacancy in a way that will create better opportunities of affordable housing solutions.

> "When considering taxes on vacant homes, it is important to first establish that local housing concerns are driven by excess vacancies and would not be better addressed through alternative policies. Where governments decide to introduce these taxes, it is crucial that these policies include credible measures to monitor compliance."
>
> — Housing Taxation in the OECD countries, OECD, 2022.

b. The state of residential vacancy in Europe

Across Europe, the prevalence of vacant housing contrasts with the growing homelessness crisis. Census 2021 data reveals that over 47.5 million homes, nearly 20% of the total dwelling stock, stand empty, equating to nearly one in five homes sitting unused. However, it's important to note that **this data includes second homes, which are generally not available for long-term residential use and are much harder to activate for people in housing need. For most countries, census data does not allow for the clear separation of second homes from other forms of vacancy, making it difficult to assess how many of these dwellings are realistically available for reuse.**

Meanwhile, FEANTSA's latest Housing Exclusion Overview reports that 1,286,691 people are experiencing homelessness (Ethos 1, 2 and 3). Amongst those million unused dwellings lie probably a solution to put the roof over the head of those that need them the most.

Countries such as the Netherlands (4.1%), Luxembourg (5.8%), and Norway (6.9%) report the lowest vacancy rates, suggesting that a significant portion of their housing stock is actively utilized. This may reflect a stronger demand for residential properties that contributes to the maintenance of low vacancy levels.

On the other hand, countries like Greece (34.5%), Bulgaria (38.9%), and Croatia (40.1%) exhibit significantly higher vacancy rates, indicating that a considerable share of their housing stock remains unoccupied. This situation may reflect a disconnect between housing supply and housing needs.

Compared to the results of Census 2011, **we can note an increase of the rate of unoccupied dwellings across Europe (+23%)** while some individual countries such as Estonia (+88%), Poland (+453%) or Slovakia (+134%) report higher rise. Nonetheless, the rise observed does not necessarily mean that there are more empty dwellings than it used to be, but it could also mean that the identification process is more thorough and accurate in identifying which units are truly empty.

COUNTRY	CENSUS 2021 NUMBER OF DWELLINGS	NUMBER OF UNOCCUPIED DWELLINGS (VACANT AND SECOND HOMES)	RATE OF INOCCUPANCY (IN %)	EVOLUTION FROM 2011 CENSUS
AUSTRIA	4,909,410	893,524	18.2	+12%
BELGIUM	5,781,088	831,097	14.4	+12%
BULGARIA	4,258,585	1,657,674	**38.9**	+36%
CROATIA	2,391,944	958,499	**40.1**	+28%
CYPRUS	491,545	138,113	**28.1**	+3%
CZECHIA	5,340,033	859,894	16.1	+32%
DENMARK	3,071,987	405,737	13.2	+11%
ESTONIA	732,836	175,690	**24.0**	+88%
FINLAND	3,124,286	357,609	11.4	+32%
FRANCE	37,042,023	6,631,891	17.9	+18%
GERMANY	43,106,589	3,303,789	7.7	-9%
GREECE	6,596,761	2,277,615	**34.5**	+1%
HUNGARY	4,566,313	564,456	12.4	+18%
ICELAND	141,113	14,320	10.1	+73%
IRELAND	2,108,065	275,593	13.1	-20%
ITALY	35,271,829	9,581,772	**27.2**	+35%
LATVIA	1,063,939	252,947	**23.8**	+20%
LIECHTENSTEIN	21,329	3,767	17.7	+25%
LITHUANIA	1,437,680	224,283	15.6	+13%
LUXEMBOURG	263,647	15,337	5.8	-5%
MALTA	297,305	81,612	**27.5**	+15%
NETHERLANDS	7,832,373	322,586	4.1	-38%
NORWAY	2,684,261	186,242	6.9	-12%
POLAND	15,227,927	2,745,342	18.0	+748%
PORTUGAL	5,970,677	1,828,096	**30.6**	-2%
ROMANIA	9,914,511	2,518,452	**25.4**	+76%
SLOVAKIA	2,178,429	458,999	**21.1**	+134%
SLOVENIA	864,323	165,576	19.2	-5%
SPAIN	26,623,706	8,087,091	**30.4**	+14%
SWEDEN	5,510,195	982,630	17.8	+20%
SWITZERLAND	4,688,288	749,813	16.0	+1852%
TOTAL	**243,512,997**	**47,550,046**	**19.5**	**+23%**

Fig 4: Unoccupied dwellings and vacancy trends in Europe – 2021 Census Data
Source: EU People and Housing Census 2021, as seen on May 16th Countries in bold have vacancy rates above the EU average of 19.2%, suggesting a higher potential for repurposing unused housing stock

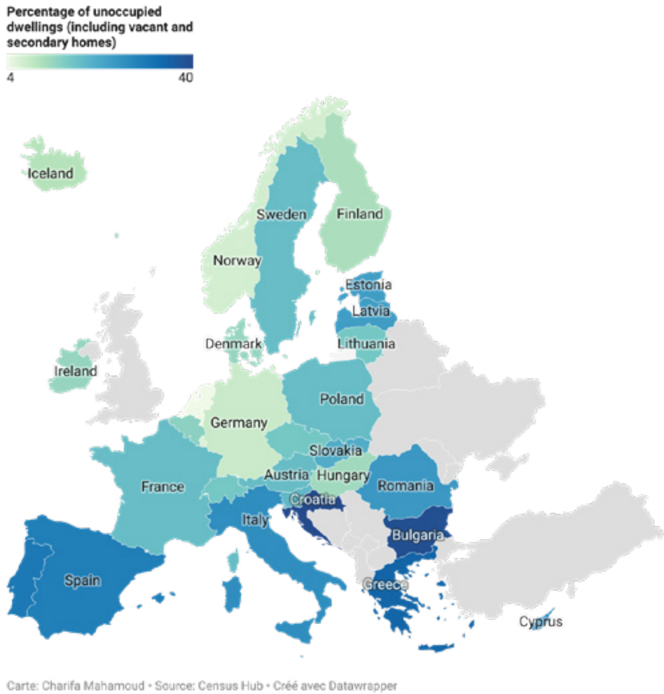

Fig 5: Map of dwelling vacancy rates compared to total housing stock – 2021 Census Data
Author: Charifa Mahamoud - Source: Census 2021, Eurostat

Examining inoccupancy rates by region, policymakers and stakeholders can identify trends and prioritize properties that are most suitable for repurposing. For example, **in regions with a high concentration of older buildings, repurposing efforts could focus on energy efficiency upgrades and structural repairs, while in regions with newer buildings, the focus could be on modernizing and improving accessibility.**

In the North-West European region, countries like Belgium, Denmark, and Sweden have a high number of vacant dwellings built between 1961 and 2000, with Sweden maintaining a significant share of dwellings from this period.

Post-2010, the number of vacant dwellings from newer constructions is much lower, with Denmark showing a steep decline from nearly 140,000 vacant dwellings built between 1961-1980 to fewer than 20,000 from post-2010 constructions by 2016.

In the Central and Eastern European region, countries like Bulgaria, Hungary, and Czechia also have a substantial number of vacant dwellings from the same period, with Bulgaria recording nearly 500,000 vacant dwellings built between the 1960s and 1980s.

Similarly, in Southern Europe, particularly in Italy, Spain, and Greece, a large share of vacant dwellings was built before 2000, with Italy surpassing 3 million units. However, post-2010, the number of vacant dwellings from newly built units dropped significantly.

Overall, we notice that, across Europe, **54% of the empty dwelling stock was constructed between 1961 and 2000**. Many of those buildings would **require extensive renovations to meet modern standards of energy efficiency**. To unlock their unique potential, **targeted policies are necessary** such as **providing incentives** to owners through grants, **leveraging EU funding programs for retrofitting** and promoting community-centred projects that **consider local needs**. However, to achieve the goal of alleviating homelessness by reusing empty properties, it is crucial to ensure that the renovated housing remain affordable.

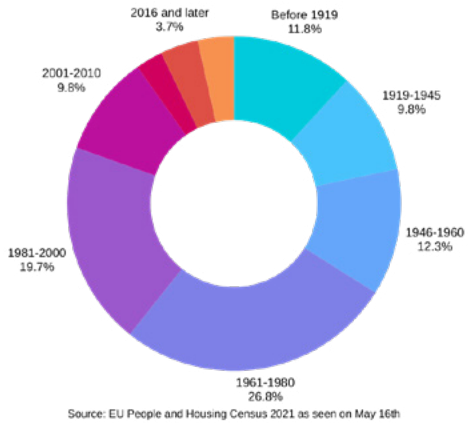

Fig 6: Distribution of unoccupied housing stock by construction period across Europe

A nuanced approach to vacancy data is essential for fully understanding the scope of vacant properties across Europe. It is important to consider not just vacancy rates, but also the type of vacancy and the ownership structure of these properties. **Vacant homes are not always easily mobilizable**, ownership may range from private individuals and property developers to public entities like social housing providers, state institutions, or even religious organizations such as the Church. **Publicly owned properties are often more accessible for repurposing into housing, whereas privately owned or speculative properties can be more difficult to mobilize without the right incentives or regulatory measures**.

Additionally, **"healthy" vacancy, which allows for movement during renovations or decohabitations, is essential for housing markets.** Understanding these differences helps create a more accurate assessment of housing availability and its potential for addressing housing shortages or homelessness.

Vacancy across various real estate sectors in Europe presents both challenges and opportunities, particularly when it comes to repurposing these spaces into affordable housing. Each sector: office, commercial retail, underused housing, and cultural heritage properties has its own unique dynamics and constraints, which must be considered when exploring potential solutions to address housing shortages.

CHAPTER

II

Typologies of vacant buildings and potential for repurposing

a. Office and commercial buildings

The office space market in Europe has seen fluctuating vacancy rates in recent years, driven in part by shifts in work patterns, particularly the rise of remote and hybrid work models. According to the Knight Frank Q3 2023 report, office vacancy rates in major cities are substantial, with Bucharest at 16%, Barcelona at 11.5%, and Berlin at 4.2%. Other cities like Paris (Île-de-France region) and Warsaw also show notable vacancy rates. Although repurposing office buildings for residential use could help alleviate housing shortages, several challenges stand in the way. **Many office buildings are not designed for residential living, often lacking key features such as proper insulation, adequate natural lighting, and sufficient ventilation.** Additionally, the cost of converting these spaces into residential units can be high, particularly if structural modifications are needed to meet housing standards. **Zoning regulations also pose a significant challenge**, as many office buildings are in areas zoned for commercial use, that sometimes require legal changes to repurpose them for another use – in this case housing.

The commercial real estate market, particularly retail spaces, faces similar issues. The rise of e- commerce has significantly reduced demand for physical retail space, leaving many retail properties vacant.

According to Cushman & Wakefield's 2023 European Macro Outlook report, retail vacancy rates are expected to stabilize and gradually decrease starting in 2024. However, significant vacancies remain in several countries. For example, in the UK, a study by Glide (2019) found that 30.75% of vacant local authority-owned properties were retail spaces, with 18.8% of vacant properties in Scotland and 45% in Wales also being retail. While repurposing these spaces for residential or community use could help address housing needs, **challenges include the size and layout of retail spaces.** These buildings are typically large, open spaces that may require significant alterations to accommodate housing. **Furthermore, retail spaces are often located in high-demand commercial areas, which may make them unaffordable for affordable housing unless public investment is made.**

In several European cities, the reuse of upper floors in commercial buildings has been directly leveraged to fight housing exclusion. In Dublin, the City Council's Adaptive Reuse Programme converts vacant upper-storey spaces into social housing, including recent projects on Capel Street and in Ringsend.

b. Underused residential stock

Underused housing is another significant issue across Europe, with around one-third of the population living in under-occupied homes. The highest rates of under-occupancy are in Malta (72.3%), Cyprus (70.9%), and Ireland (67.3%), while countries like Romania (7.3%) and Latvia (9.4%) report much lower rates. **Under-occupancy often points to a mismatch between the available housing stock and the needs of the population.** This situation is especially prevalent in tight housing markets where **people are unable to afford to move into more suitable homes.**

However, barriers to utilizing under-occupied homes for affordable housing include legal and financial challenges, as well as emotional and regulatory concerns. Homeowners may be reluctant to rent out part of their properties due to fears around maintenance, non-payment, potential damage, loss of control over their home or difficulty recovering possession.[64]

In addition to underused housing, underutilized land also offers opportunities for gentle densification, particularly in suburban or semi-urban areas.

Examples from France, such as the "Villes Vivantes" initiative[65], demonstrate how subdividing large plots and reconfiguring existing parcels can create new, small-scale housing solutions while preserving the character of existing neighbourhoods.

Fig 7: Share of people living in under-occupied homes in Europe
Source: Share of people living in under-occupied dwellings by age, sex and poverty status - total population, Eurostat

c. Historical and religious buildings vacancy

Historical and religious real estate presents a unique set of challenges when it comes to vacancy. Many of these properties are underused or vacant due to the high costs of maintenance, as well as the preservation laws that protect them. In several European countries, **heritage buildings remain empty due to the difficulty in adapting them to modern needs.** Converting these heritage properties into affordable housing presents both opportunities and obstacles. On one hand, repurposing these properties could help preserve cultural heritage while addressing the growing demand for housing. On the other hand, the **costs involved in restoring and adapting these buildings to meet modern residential standards can be prohibitive.** Additionally, preservation laws may limit the extent to which these properties can be altered or modernized. There is a tension between managing the buildings as assets and the affordability of housing produced.

So, even when these buildings are turned into housing, they will not necessarily be the type of housing that is affordable and accessible to the most vulnerable on the housing market.

Despite these challenges, some projects have successfully demonstrated the potential of converting historical and religious buildings into housing for vulnerable groups. In Spain, initiatives like the rehabilitation of convents into shelters have provided temporary accommodation such as the Llar Sant Joan de Déu Manresa project in Catalonia.[1]

In Belgium, the Bethléem project transformed former religious buildings into housing units for people experiencing homelessness. Similarly, in France, the Maison Saint-Charles in Paris was repurposed to provide a mix of social housing units and community facilities offering stable accommodation to vulnerable households.

1 cf. FEANTSA - Repurposing vacant spaces into homes – Collection of best practices, 2025

CHAPTER III

Identifying housing needs and the role of vacant spaces to address them

a. Sufficiency in housing: balancing sustainability, needs and demands

While the construction sector contributes to approximately 9% of the EU's annual greenhouse gas emissions[66], it faces increasing pressure to operate within planetary boundaries. Simultaneously, the ongoing housing and homelessness crises call for providing more adequate homes that can absorb unmet need for housing.

Transitioning towards a more sustainable construction sector involves considering alternatives to new construction, such as repurposing and reusing existing buildings. However, a question arises: **to what extent can the existing built stock effectively address unmet housing needs?**

To accurately assess this situation, it's crucial to **distinguish between housing need and want or demand** – even though these terms often overlap and are sometimes used interchangeably. **Housing need refers to ensuring the right to adequate housing for everyone.** Adequacy, as defined under international law includes tenure security, habitability, affordability and suitability to the household. Satisfying housing need would mean ensuring that everyone was able to get and keep a decent home. It would necessitate ending homelessness and ensuring that nobody had to live in inadequate or insecure housing, defined according to minimum thresholds.

Housing demand is broader than housing need and includes housing "wants" e.g. consumers' desire to purchase housing. This is driven by a broad range of motivations that go beyond satisfying basic needs (investment, increased comfort and space, desirability of a particular location etc).[67]

The distinction between need and want is a complicated matter. It relates to housing's hybrid nature as both a right and a good. Housing demand is driven by both need and want. Furthermore, housing systems are complex and hybrid. Housing is produced by private, for-profit entities, as well as public, and no-or limited profit actors. Consumption looks vastly different depending on tenure, and whether the housing functions as a primary residence. Public authorities intervene in housing systems, pursuing a variety of goals, and using different mechanisms like social housing, housing benefits, tax relief, planning laws.[68]

The need to make construction more sustainable and stick to carbon budgets, means that "sufficiency" arguments are increasingly being applied to housing. This entails asking how much housing is "enough" and what limits on housing production and consumption might be possible. **The crux of the sufficiency argument is that we should make better use of existing stock and build less new housing. In a context where many people are manifestly unable to satisfy their basic housing needs, it is an extremely sensitive case. At the same time, simply boosting supply without taking proper account of housing need will not fix the housing crisis.** Using vacant stock to provide housing that does not respond to unmet need could be considered a waste of a precious resource.

Given our mission of ending homelessness, FEANTSA has a strong interest in contributing to debates on housing sufficiency. **Pressure to limit housing construction must not undermine States' duty to ensure the right to adequate housing for all. At the same time, current approaches to housing construction in many countries do not appear to provide adequate responses to housing need. A credible sufficiency approach requires focusing the available stock on unmet housing need.**

To contribute to emerging discussions about housing sufficiency, we have explored whether and how European countries assess housing needs. The following table puts into perspective methodologies used by some European countries, and their housing construction targets for years to come.

Disclaimer:

The table below is not exhaustive. It provides an overview of how selected countries assess their housing needs as well as their current or planned housing construction targets. While methodologies vary significantly, this mapping serves as a comparative snapshot of national approaches to estimating needs and setting policy objectives accordingly for housing production.

	HOUSING NEEDS ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY
AUSTRIA	The Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning (ÖROK) is an organisation founded by the federal government, the federal states and municipalities to coordinate national spatial planning. In 2005, the ÖROK published a development forecast of households and housing requirements resulting from it.[69] Other external bodies such as Bank of Austria or the Institut für Immobilien, Bauen und Wohnen also provide studies on housing market. For the Bank of Austria, housing needs estimations are mainly based on overcrowded housing rates and demographic evolutions forecast.[70] On the other hand, researchers assessed housing demand by summing: - the demand for primary residences (through changes in household and migration), - secondary residences, - vacancy needed to maintain an optimum vacancy rate, - and net loss of housing (because of demolition, reclassification, or merge with other homes...).[71]
BELGIUM	
CROATIA	Croatia's National Housing Policy Plan (2023-2030) identifies a significant housing shortage, estimating a demand for over 235,000 housing units.[74] The assessment considers factors such as the high vacancy rates and the challenges faced by young families in accessing affordable housing, particularly in tourist areas where properties are often reserved for short-term rentals.[75]
CZECHIA	
FRANCE	A free tool called "Otelo" helps local authorities forecast housing needs over a 6-year period. It takes into consideration: - the number of **homeless households** - the number of **concealed households** - the number of **households in financial difficulties** - the number of **households in poor quality housing** - the number of **households in overcrowded housing** And it also considers the projections of **future demands** linked to: - demographic evolution - evolution of the actual housing stock (demolitions, renovations...)

Fig 8: Overview of housing needs assessment methodologies and housing construction targets in European countries

HOUSING CONSTRUCTION TARGETS

In 2005, the ÖROK stated that 46,000 new units were needed from 2001 to 2011. Then, 40,000 for the decade following and down to 28,000 from 2021 onwards.[3]

In 2017, Bank Austria estimated the need to build 45,000 to 50,000 new homes each year.[4]

While the Austrian Institute for Real Estate, Construction and Housing estimated this number to amount 60,000. [4]

Since 2013, in the Brussels Region, the Habitat Alliance plan provides for the construction of 4,000 homes annually including 3,000 social housing. An emergency housing plan for 2020 – 2024 proposed the construction or acquisition of 4,650 new units, the provision of 1,750 housing units from the private stock at the social housing rate, the renovation of 36,758 social housing units and the development of 2,500 units through social real estate agencies (AIS).

According to the Wallonian Institute of Evaluation, Perspective and Statistics (IWEPS), the need for new homes to be built in the Wallonia Region attains 8,400 per year between 2022 and 2037.[72]

On the other hand, Embuild, the Belgian construction federation, estimates that Belgium will need 225,000 additional homes by 2030.[73]

The government's housing policy prioritizes expanding the housing stock to meet needs. Officially, the State Housing Policy sets goals to improve affordability and increase supply.[76]

While there is no single fixed nationwide target number of units per year, expert assessments from the latest European Construction Industry Federation (FIEC) suggest around 37,000 new dwellings annually are needed to satisfy demand.[77]

At a national level, multiple organisations estimated the number of houses that should be constructed or put back on the market each year.

- The governmental objective, set by the Court of Auditors is 375,000[78], based on demographic trends, household formation and the need to replace ageing or inadequate housing stock.[79]
- For the French Federation of Real Estate Developers, it should attain 449,000[80], based on additional demand linked to market dynamics.[81]
- For the Social Housing Union (USH), the objective should amount to 518,000 including 198,000 social housing[82], combining demographic needs, affordability challenges and the objective to reduce housing exclusion.

	HOUSING NEEDS ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY
GERMANY	The Eduard Pestel Institute for Systems Research was commissioned by the Social Housing Alliance to produce an overview of the housing situation in Germany. [83] To measure housing needs, calculations are based on: - the actual housing situation including housing stock and housing deficit - the population development including migration, births, deaths and evolution of age structures Furthermore, the need for social housing is measured by analysing: - the social housing deficit - the employment development - the number of recipients of minimum income benefits
GREECE	Although there is currently no comprehensive national housing policy framework in Greece, the issue of housing needs assessment has started to gain local attention. In the municipality of Thessaloniki, the **Draft Integrated Action Plan on Social and Affordable Housing and Combating Housing Exclusion and Homelessness**[86] explicitly acknowledges the lack of systematic data on housing needs as a barrier to effective planning. One of the plan's key objectives is to develop a methodology for assessing housing demand at the local level, with a particular focus on vulnerable groups.
IRELAND	Each local authorities undertake an "Housing Need and Demand Assessment" which guidelines are set by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The inventory is composed of 4 parts: - **housing market drivers** (household formation, housing affordability, demographic evolution...) - **housing stock profile and pressures** - **estimated housing needs** (from present needs and future households needs estimations, including homeless households) - **special housing needs** (students, international workers, elderly, disabilities...) All those parts are combined to create an overview of the estimated housing needs in each local authority area.[87]
LUXEMBOURG	There is no formal housing needs assessment done, the housing construction target is solely based on the net migration figures (difference between arrivals and departures).[90] *Nb: The percentage of household on social housing waiting lists should be added to this count. They amounted to more than 5,500, increasing by 43.1% between 2021 and end of March 2023.* [91]
MOLDOVA	There is no formal housing needs assessment done in Moldova. However, a general lack of accessible housing is noticed especially among Roma population and travellers.[93] In the context of Ukrainian refugees' arrival, Moldova Rental Market Assessment were undertook to evaluate their accommodation needs and priorities.[94] [95]
NETHERLANDS	Every year 3 years, a Netherlands' Housing Survey (Woon Onderzoek Nederland) is carried out by the government on a sample of the population in each province. This is not an extensive survey and it only considers people that are already tenants or owner-occupiers.

HOUSING CONSTRUCTION TARGETS
According to the Federal Government, 400,000 apartments need to be built every year starting from 2024 onwards, including 100,000 publicly subsidized. [84] [85]
Under the Housing for All plan, government set the target of 33,000 new units provided annually.[88] In April 2024, the newly Prime Minister revised this target and expects an increase of that target up to 50,000 new homes annually until 2030.[89]
Considering the demographic evolution, with a growth of approximatively 12,000 newcomers each year, there should be 6,000 houses built per year.[92]
The ABF Research, a Dutch independent research and consultancy firm specializing in spatial and housing forecasts, reports that between 2022 and 2030 981,000 new homes should be created based on the Primos forecast 2021.[96] [97] The objective is to achieve a 2% housing shortage compared to households' development forecast. In May 2024, a new housing plan has been redacted in agreement between the PVV, VVD, NSC and BBB states that 100,000 new homes are needed annually between 2024 and 2028.[98] (According to the "Woningbouw binnen planetaire grenzen" publication, 6,000 of those homes could be provided using existing buildings.)

	HOUSING NEEDS ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY
POLAND	The Polish National Housing Programme is a strategic document that defines the state's housing policy up to 2030. In this programme, basic housing needs concern specifically households threatened by social exclusion due to low incomes or any difficult social situation. It includes households that are on the waiting lists to rent a flat from the municipality, people in protected flats, night shelters and hostels for homeless people. [99]
PORTUGAL	The Housing and Urban Renewal Institute quantified the number of families with serious housing needs, resulting in the National Survey of Re-housing Needs. [100] To identify these needs, they classified the types of constructions where households lived as follows: - shacks - conventional - houses made of natural elements - caravans - non-conventional - prefabricated houses - tents In this survey, 120 municipalities reported no housing needs at all and 187 identified 25,762 families living in unsatisfactory situations.
SLOVENIA	
SWEDEN	The National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (Boverket) publishes each year an analysis of conditions in the housing market including data on the estimated needs based on the state of the housing stock and the forecast of households' development.
UK	**England** In December 2024, the UK government introduced mandatory **Housing and Economic Development Needs Assessments (HEDNA)** for local authorities in England. **Assessment criteria:** Councils evaluate: - Homeless households. - Households in temporary accommodation or overcrowded housing. - Concealed (multifamily) households. - Existing affordable housing tenants in unsuitable dwellings. - Households unable to afford market rents or ownership. **Methodology:** Combines demographic projections, suppressed demand, and vacancy rate adjustments to model housing supply scenarios. **Scotland** Scotland uses the **Housing Need and Demand Assessment (HNDA)** system, which integrates: - Local housing needs (e.g., homelessness, overcrowding). - Market demand projections. - Affordability gaps. **Wales** The **Local Housing Market Assessment (LHMA)** framework focuses on: - Needs of vulnerable groups (e.g., homeless, elderly). - Balancing supply with affordability. - Aligning with regional economic strategies

HOUSING CONSTRUCTION TARGETS

Through the reform of the Housing Policy the Slovenian government has committed to build 5,000 new dwellings by 2026. Also, approximatively 2,000 currently empty private dwellings should be acquired and renovated by public housing funds.[101]

According to the UK Housing Review 2024, 300,000 homes per year should be constructed until 2030, including 60-70,000 social housing. Then, from 2030, the numbers should attain 330-350,000 homes per year including 90,000 social housing.[102]

b. Observations

Comparing these methodologies reveals that many countries lack mechanisms for robust assessment of housing needs. The parameters considered are sometimes too limited, or the results are not thorough enough to understand the type of housing needed, at what price or where for example.

We can notice that governmental construction targets are not always clearly linked to established housing needs while understanding those needs is essential for setting realistic and comprehensive construction goals that address the needs of the entire population.

We can also see that multiple and sometimes very divergent housing production targets exist and feed into government targets. Some countries do use data on homeless households, households living in overcrowding, households on social housing waiting lists, households in inadequate housing etc in their elaboration of construction targets. This anchors construction targets in housing need and would seem to be a precondition of a sufficiency approach.

Housing construction targets frequently make abstraction of the type of housing that is needed. For example, number of bedrooms or rent levels. Again, this would seem to be a precondition for a sufficiency approach. By comparing the annual construction needs with available vacant spaces, we can evaluate the feasibility of relying on vacancies to fulfil housing needs. For example, in 2022, England had approximately 676,000 vacant homes.[103] Given the target of around 300,000 homes per year, these vacancies could theoretically cover less than three years of new housing supply.

However, we must also consider that not all vacant spaces are suitable for immediate occupancy. Many vacant buildings may require significant renovations to meet housing standards. Additionally, some vacant properties are not located in areas with sufficient access to employment opportunities, essential services and amenities making them less viable for housing.

This reinforces the **importance of a detailed and nuanced approach to repurposing vacant spaces to address housing and homelessness crises.** Integrating the potential of unused and underused spaces with realistic renovation and conversion plans allows more accurate housing strategies that ensure adequate, safe, and accessible homes for everyone.

c. Recommendations

- **Public authorities at national, regional and local level should conduct detailed housing needs assessments to establish accurate housing production targets.** This exercise should engage various stakeholders, including local authorities, social service providers, and community organisations, to ensure that the assessment reflects the diversity of needs.

- Assessments should be conducted as locally as possible. Compiling these local assessments can then help identify trends and areas that require increased housing production efforts.

- An effective and extensive housing needs assessment should, at least, include:

    - Homeless households
    - People obliged to stay with family or friends
    - Households in temporary accommodation
    - Households in inadequate housing
    - Households on social housing waiting lists

- **Housing needs assessments should be regularly updated to reflect current data and trends, ensuring that housing targets remain relevant and achievable.**

CHAPTER
IV

Guidance on adequate conversion

Connecting local housing needs with the availability of vacant spaces requires a thorough understanding of both the demand for housing in a specific area and the supply of vacant properties that could be repurposed. Key questions to consider include:

How can we evaluate the existing housing stock to identify the best candidates for repurposing? What criteria should be used to determine which vacant spaces are most suitable for conversion into housing?

a. Assessing the existing housing stock to identify the best candidates for repurpose

To effectively tackle homelessness and housing exclusion across Europe using vacant spaces as a lever, a **systematic approach is needed to identify and prioritize vacant properties for repurposing.** To do so, a comprehensive local assessment is necessary, combining data analysis with on-site visits.

Additionally, by developing a comprehensive indicator that evaluates the feasibility and potential of each property, organizations can make informed decisions about which spaces are most suitable for conversion into housing. An example of such an indicator exists in France, where the **Banque des Territoires**, in collaboration with the **Cerema**, has developed the **LOVAC** database.

This tool assists local authorities in identifying and characterizing long-term vacant dwellings by providing detailed information such as building type, year of construction, duration of vacancy and property condition. The LOVAC database supports municipalities in prioritizing properties for conversion into housing, ensuring that repurposing efforts are both impactful and sustainable.[104]

Properties located in **well-connected urban areas with access to public transport, schools, healthcare, and job opportunities are the most suitable candidates for conversion into housing.** These areas are not only more attractive to potential residents but also ensure that those experiencing homelessness or housing exclusion can access the support and services they need. For example, a vacant apartment building in a city center with good transport links is far more viable for repurposing than a derelict house in a remote rural area.

While well-connected areas should be prioritized, **less active areas such as rural regions or small towns experiencing population decline also present opportunities for repurposing**. In these areas, the repurposing of multiple empty houses can act as a lever to repopulate and densify the area, provided that wider urban regeneration initiatives are implemented. For example, in Croatia, the government has started selling vacant rural dwellings for as little as 1 kuna (€0.13) to attract new residents and **revitalize shrinking towns**.

However, repurposing in less active areas requires a long-term approach. Unlike in urban centers, where repurposing can provide immediate housing solutions, the transformation of rural or declining areas into vibrant communities takes time. This means that **while repurposing in these areas may not address immediate housing needs, it can help to prevent future housing shortages by creating sustainable, long-term solutions.** For instance, in countries where many rural areas have high vacancy rates, repurposing efforts could be combined with **investments in local infrastructure, such as schools, healthcare facilities, and public transport, to make these areas more attractive to potential residents.** It is also important to note that repurposing empty properties in less active areas may not be economically viable without public subsidies or incentives for private investors. For example, in Portugal, the "More Housing" law provides financial incentives for owners to rent out vacant properties, helping to make repurposing projects more feasible.

Repurposing vacant houses is a powerful tool for addressing housing shortages and homelessness, but it requires a **balanced approach that takes into account the location, condition, and age of properties, as well as the needs of local communities.** By prioritizing well-connected areas with amenities, we can provide immediate housing solutions for those in need. At the same time, by investing in less active areas, we can prevent future housing shortages.

To be effective, **the economic model behind the renovation must ensure that the housing produced remains affordable for the intended population,** particularly those in the most acute housing need. Affordability must not be defined by market metrics alone, but relative to what people on low incomes can pay. Moreover, **access to repurposed housing should be based on clear social allocation criteria.** When public resources are involved, a sufficiency approach requires prioritising people in urgent housing need, such as those experiencing homelessness, overcrowding or other inadequate living conditions, so that repurposing genuinely contributes to reducing housing exclusion.

b. The role of stakeholders in access to repurposed properties for those facing housing exclusion and homelessness

Repurposing vacant real estate is a process that involves the collaboration of multiple stakeholders, each bringing unique expertise, resources, and perspectives to the table. These stakeholders operate across different sectors, work on varying timelines, and often have distinct visions and goals. However, their **collective efforts are essential to ensure that the conversion of empty buildings into housing is not only successful but also accessible and inclusive for everyone, particularly for those experiencing housing exclusion and homelessness.**

Amongst those stakeholders are public authorities and potentially, private investors, who provide the necessary funding to acquire, renovate, and manage vacant properties. Financial resources are critical for **large-scale repurposing projects,** but a focus on profitability can conflict with the goal of creating affordable housing. To ensure that repurposing efforts respond to **housing need rather than market demand, public funding must play a central role.**

Through subsidies, acquisition schemes or public ownership, local authorities can help secure and convert vacant properties for affordable housing.

Most importantly, **affordable housing should be defined in relation to the income levels of those in the most acute housing need,** not just relative to average market prices. As outlined in **FEANTSA's 2024 report on the EU Affordable Housing Plan**[105], a **sufficiency approach** argues for housing systems that ensure everyone has access to decent, adequate housing within their means while prioritising the lowest-income households and those at risk of exclusion.

This approach not only safeguards long-term affordability but also ensures that repurposing aligns with social objectives. Public funding should be accompanied by strong **social conditionalities**, such as affordability requirements, social allocation criteria or long-term tenure guarantees.

While private real estate actors may still be involved, particularly in construction, leasing or maintenance, their participation should be clearly regulated to avoid rent inflation or the exclusion of low-income households.

On the other hand, social housing organizations, which focus should specifically be on creating affordable and social housing for low-income households are particularly important in ensuring that housing remains affordable over the long term, even as market conditions change.

The involvement of other social stakeholders such as local authorities and support service providers plays a crucial role in ensuring that repurposed properties are accessible to those most in need. Their participation helps ensure that the allocation process is transparent, needs-based, and supported by services like rent assistance, employment support or healthcare. **Without these services, even the most well-designed repurposing projects may fail to address the underlying challenges faced by those experiencing housing exclusion.**

Beyond service providers, involving **future occupants** in the planning or renovation process can also enhance the sustainability and social value of projects. In the UK, for instance, community-led housing initiatives like **Gyroscope and Canopy** enable people experiencing housing insecurity to co- produce and renovate their own homes. Similarly,

Community Land Trusts (CLTs) across Europe activate vacant or underused buildings through participatory models that ensure long-term affordability. For example, **Brussels CLT** has transformed former industrial or vacant sites into mixed-income housing developments, with future residents involved in governance and planning. In **Lille (France)**, the CLT La Fabrique des Quartiers reuses derelict housing stock with strong public backing, while in **Germany**, initiatives like Mietshäuser Syndikat incorporate resident-led cooperative ownership to keep housing permanently off the speculative market.

FACTORS	WHAT NEEDS TO BE CONSIDERED?
TENURE TYPE	Prioritize long-term secure rentals over temporary solutions. Temporary use of vacant stock may provide shelter but fails to deliver structural solutions to homelessness.
ALLOCATION MECHANISMS	Transparent and fair allocation procedures are essential. Mechanisms should be needs-based and be co-designed with local actors and social services.
AFFORDABILITY	Ensure rents are linked to income levels and aligned with local housing needs. Consider long-term affordability via subsidies or social housing status.
SUPPORT SERVICES	Incorporate on-site or linked social support, especially for vulnerable populations (as seen in Grand Parade, Live and Work, From Huts to Homes projects).
LOCATION AND ACCESS	Target well-connected urban areas with proximity to transport, services, and employment to support long-term integration and reduce social isolation.
LEGAL FRAMEWORKS	Ensure legal security for tenants and clear responsibilities for owners. Use occupancy agreements or public management rights to formalize reuse (example: Brussels Region case).

c. Repurposing strategies for different types of buildling

The approach to repurposing vacant buildings varies significantly depending on the type of structure. Each type presents unique challenges and opportunities, requiring tailored strategies to transform them into viable housing solutions.

Converting office buildings into residential units often involves significant upgrades to mechanical systems (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning) and plumbing systems. Older buildings, particularly those constructed before the 1980s, may also pose risks such as the presence of asbestos, requiring careful remediation.

Existing residential buildings may only need minor renovations or rearrangement of space to create smaller, more affordable units. This approach is often more cost-effective and less disruptive than large-scale conversions. **Vacant public buildings**, such as schools or government offices, can be repurposed into housing, especially in areas with high demand. These buildings often have robust structures and are located in well-connected areas, making them ideal candidates for conversion.

Industrial or commercial buildings can also be transformed into housing, though this typically requires more extensive renovations due to differences in layout and infrastructure.

Another innovative strategy is **vertical extensions**, which involve adding additional floors to existing buildings. Examples from England, Germany, and Belgium, as highlighted in the research paper "Building Vertical Extensions and Increasing Housing Stock in Cities: Review of Selected European Research", demonstrate how this approach can **increase housing supply without the need for new land**. Financing for these projects can be achieved through creative solutions, such as **selling the right to build on the roof to fund upgrades**. For instance, in Switzerland and in France (for example in Strasbourg[106] and Lyon[107]), extensions and energy renovations have been financed by selling roof occupancy rights to other operators.

However, **vertical extensions come with challenges.** For example, in France, the owner of the upper- floor apartment has priority to purchase the roof or the newly built unit, which can complicate the process. Additionally, constructing additional floors on existing buildings can be more expensive than building new structures on the same surface area.

d. Navigating the challenges of repurposing for short-term versus longer-term use

Vacant spaces can be repurposed for temporary or permanent use, depending on the needs of the community and the possibilities that the sites and funding offer. However, security of tenure is an essential component of the right to adequate housing. Mobilising vacant space for temporary solutions will not ensure the right to housing. Temporary repurposing can play a role in addressing immediate housing crises. For example, in Denmark, local authorities can assign tenants to properties vacant for more than 6 weeks, ensuring these spaces meet urgent housing needs. **However, a more permanent housing solution is always required.**

Temporary solutions come with their own set of challenges. If temporary occupancy extends beyond the planned duration, additional adjustments may be necessary to **prevent building deterioration**, often requiring **further investment**. Moreover, squatting, often a direct response to the inadequate use of vacant properties, emphasises the urgency of addressing housing shortages.

For example, in Rennes, asylum seekers and homeless individuals have occupied empty houses in a neighbourhood scheduled for demolition by 2027 as part of an urban regeneration project.[108] This informal use of vacant spaces contrasts with formal temporary occupancy arrangements, like the Netherlands' anti-squatting ('anti-kraak') system. While anti-squatting legally permits temporary occupation of vacant properties, it typically offers occupants minimal rights: contracts can be terminated with as little as 2-4 weeks' notice, utilities may be disconnected, and occupants lack standard tenant protections against sudden eviction.

In contrast, permanent repurposing offers a more sustainable solution to the housing crisis. In Portugal, the "More Housing" law enables municipalities to force the lease of houses that have been vacant for over 2 years in areas of high urban concentration and density, ensuring they are returned to the market as long-term housing. A similar long-term repurposing approach was taken in Karlsruhe, Germany, where the real estate company Immoba, after acquiring the bankrupt Paracelsus Clinic, partnered with the city's housing acquisition department.

This cooperation led to the creation of 100 residential units under the "Haus Turmbergblick" project, which now accommodates people with low incomes or on welfare benefits, including individuals who had experienced homelessness.[109]

This approach not only addresses housing shortages but also helps stabilize rental markets and reduce speculation. However, **permanent repurposing demands more extensive planning and investment, particularly for buildings requiring significant renovations or structural upgrades.**

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, repurposing vacant spaces presents an opportunity to address Europe's ongoing housing shortages and homelessness crises. Vacant buildings, with the **right strategies and investment**, can help alleviate the pressure on housing markets and provide affordable homes. However, transforming these spaces into viable housing solutions requires a **nuanced, context-sensitive approach** that considers not only the **physical characteristics of the properties but also the specific needs of local communities.**

As we explore the potential of repurposing vacant spaces, it becomes clear that such efforts must be rooted in **detailed and comprehensive housing needs assessments.** These assessments are essential to understanding the variety of housing needs within a community, from those experiencing homelessness to families in need of affordable housing. **Without accurate data and informed decision-making, repurposing efforts may inadvertently fail to address the most urgent housing needs.**

With those factors in mind, the following recommendations can be made to encourage the development of repurposed housing projects:

1. Ensure the affordability of repurposed properties:

Ensuring that the repurposed properties remain affordable for low-income households requires careful planning, including rent controls, subsidies, and long-term social housing commitments. Affordability should be built into the design and funding mechanisms from the outset.

2. Prioritize people experiencing homelessness and those living in inadequate housing:

Every opportunity should be taken to use appropriate vacant space to house individuals and households facing homelessness or living in substandard, overcrowded or unsafe housing. Targeting these groups ensures that the most urgent housing needs are met and that repurposed spaces contribute meaningfully to reducing housing exclusion.

3. Leverage legal and policy tools:

Governments should use legal and policy tools to incentivize the repurposing of vacant spaces. These may include tax incentives, grants, low- interest loans, or changes to zoning laws to facilitate the conversion of commercial or office spaces into residential units. Additionally, laws such as requisitioning vacant properties or imposing penalties on owners of long-term vacant properties can help ensure that unused spaces are brought back into productive use.

4. Ensure repurposing efforts respond to housing needs:

Mobilizing vacant spaces should be guided by local housing demand, including considerations such as homelessness, overcrowding, inadequate housing and the needs of specific groups (e.g., families, the elderly or people with disabilities). Regular assessments can help align available spaces with actual requirements. These updates will ensure that housing production targets remain relevant and achievable

5. Prioritize well-connected urban areas:

Properties located in well-connected urban areas, close to public transport, schools, healthcare, and employment opportunities, should be prioritized for repurposing. These areas are not only more attractive to potential residents but also offer better access to services and support systems for vulnerable populations.

6. Consider rural repurposing efforts:

While urban areas present immediate opportunities for repurposing, rural regions and small towns experiencing population decline also offer long- term solutions. Repurposing vacant homes in these areas, combined with broader regeneration efforts, can help prevent future housing shortages.

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