

DOCUMENTATION

# 2nd Hands on Public Buildings

Repurposing modernist public buildings  
from the 1960s and 70s

REPORT ON THE CONNECTIVE CITIES DIALOGUE EVENT  
24 TO 26 SEPTEMBER 2024, BERLIN



27 experts



from 9 municipalities



from 6 countries



Partners of Connective Cities



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## Introduction

Public buildings from the 1960s and 70s are a common feature of many cityscapes around the world. Today, they rarely meet the 21st century's technical, energy and aesthetic requirements, and are frequently demolished and replaced with new buildings. However, they have great potential for reducing emissions in the construction sector, thereby contributing to climate change mitigation. It is high time we preserved these buildings, and used the grey energy embodied within their concrete and steel in a socially, economically and environmentally sustainable way. The Connective Cities '2nd Hands on Public Buildings' dialogue event, which took place on 24 to 26 September 2024 in Berlin, Germany, was dedicated to precisely this paradigm shift.

### Event overview

Almost 30 municipal practitioners from Germany, Kenya, Montenegro, the Palestinian territories, Zambia and Ukraine, came together at this event to discuss approaches to, and challenges inherent in, sustainably repurposing public buildings from the 1960s and 70s, and to develop some project ideas. They visited the 'Haus der Statistik' in Berlin, which the Berlin Senate Department presented during the event as an example of good practice (see page 3). They then made a second excursion to Berlin's Tempelhof Airport, which was closed in 2008. The airport building – constructed between 1936 and 1941, but never completed – is regarded as the largest architectural monument in Europe. Plans are now under way to develop it into an experimental space and new urban quarter for art, culture and the creative industries.

This dialogue event was organised jointly by Connective Cities and the Berlin Senate Department for Urban Development, Construction and Housing.

## Background

Repurposing existing buildings is one of the keys to climate-friendly construction. Because innovative and adaptable construction methods are now available for existing buildings, it is increasingly possible to continue using the grey energy embodied in steel and concrete, while providing economic and social answers to the increasing demand for working and living space in urban areas.

Thanks to their flexible floor plans, buildings from the 1960s and 70s – the modernist period – can be adapted to today's

requirements. As they are owned by the local authorities, the municipalities can make these inner-city spaces available for social and affordable housing.

They also offer the opportunity to go beyond conventional development concepts for one-dimensional uses of a building as office or residential space, and give the building a new lease of life with an entirely new function. Multifunctional use as residential, social, educational, cultural, retail and office space is often a possibility.

The participants on the terrace of the headquarters of the Berlin Senate Department for Urban Development, Building and Housing



## Keynote speeches – a summary

### BERLIN: POLITICAL AND PLANNING GUIDELINES FOR CREATING RESIDENTIAL SPACE

Lars Loebner, Head of the 'Housing Projects – Outer City' Office at the Berlin Senate Department for Urban Development, Construction and Housing (Germany)

By 2040, Berlin will need around 220,000 new residential units. The Berlin Senate Department's 'Construction' urban development plan not only envisages the construction of 24 new districts, but also the continued use of older buildings – always with the aim of creating living space that is as sustainable as possible, for example in terms of energy use, mobility and efficiency. At the same time, Berlin's green and blue spaces, which make up 40 percent of the urban area, are to be preserved as far as possible. Around 80 percent of Berlin's population lives in rented accommodation; social housing is integrated into every city district.

*"An important criterion for the reconstruction of the 'House of Revolution' was that the ongoing operating costs would be covered by the use of the building as TV and radio studios."*

Nevena Delibašić, Design and Planning Department for the city of Nikšić in Montenegro

### BERLIN: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE RE-USE OF EXISTING BUILDINGS

Moritz Theloe, Project Manager of the new 'Buch – Am Sandhaus' city district at the Berlin Senate Department for Urban Development, Construction and Housing (Germany)

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Berlin's 'Mietskasernen' (literally 'rental barracks') – multi-storey tenements – were built to provide affordable housing for the German capital's growing population. These were replaced in the 1920s by new buildings in a lighter, airier and brighter early modernist style. Both styles of building are now highly sought-after living space and many have been extensively renovated.

A variety of approaches has been used with the German Democratic Republic's (GDR's) architectural heritage. While the former State Council building now houses a private university, the Palace of the Republic, which was built between 1973 and 1976, was demolished between 2006 and 2008. Today, the site is occupied by a partial reconstruction of the Berlin Palace, the ruins of the original having been demolished in 1950.



'Home of Revolution' in Nikšić, Montenegro

### NIKŠIĆ (MONTENEGRO): THE 'HOME OF REVOLUTION'

Nevena Delibašić, Design and Planning Department for the city of Nikšić (Montenegro)

The 'Home of Revolution' building complex was built during the brutalist period, a widespread architectural style in former Yugoslavia. Montenegro was part of Yugoslavia until 2003. Brutalist buildings were constructed primarily from concrete, which was believed at the time to be a highly durable material. Begun in 1978, the 'House of Revolution' building was intended to be a symbol of Yugoslavian partisan resistance during World War II, and to have a wide range of uses, from TV studios, a theatre and banks, to offices for the Ministry of Culture. However, construction on the 22,000 square metre building complex was never completed. In 2021, new ideas were put forward for giving the ruin a new lease of life: Studios for a TV and radio broadcaster were installed in the northern part of the complex in September 2024. With this measure, the city also fulfilled the original idea for the use of the 'House of Revolution'.

#### Background information

The event took place at the headquarters of the Berlin Senate Department for Urban Development, Construction and Housing – a high-rise building considered a classic example of post-war modernism, which was built between 1954 and 1956 in the former West Berlin. The building was extensively renovated between 2020 and 2024. During the renovations, great importance was attached to faithfulness to the original, and to conservation of resources. For example, it was possible to reuse around 65 percent of the original window constructions.



## Case studies

Participants each presented their projects showcasing the reuse of public buildings from the 1960s and 70s

The **Haus der Statistik** in central **Berlin**, built between 1968 and 1970, served as the headquarters of the State Central Department of Statistics (SZS) for the GDR. The 50,000 square metre building complex had stood empty since 2008, and was due to be demolished. However, a local initiative campaigned to preserve the building and convert it to cultural purposes. The State of Berlin bought the complex and, since 2018, has been working with various partners to develop the building as a place for art, culture, social affairs, education, administration and affordable housing. Civil society continues to play an important role in this project.

**Berlin** has plans to build one of 24 new residential areas for the city in its northern 'Buch – Am Sandhaus' district; the development will comprise 2,700 residential units. Initial plans did not include the repurposing of the former GDR State Security hospital located in the area, but this was later adopted within the plan. The city is keen to minimise its impact on nature and the landscape – an objective also demanded by civil society. Taking sufficient account of the interests of all stakeholders in the development of the district is a major challenge.

In **Bremen**, Germany, options have been investigated as to whether, and how, the Katharinenklosterhof multi-storey car park located in the city centre could be converted to give it a more attractive purpose, and to revitalise the area. The proposed scenarios envisaged a variety of uses, including residential space, office space, cultural and educational facilities and shops. The outcome of the analysis was that the conversion would be possible in theory, but is not currently economically viable, as the technical and structural risks are too high in view of the construction costs.



Guided tour of the venue, headquarters of the Berlin Senate Department for Urban Development, Building and Housing



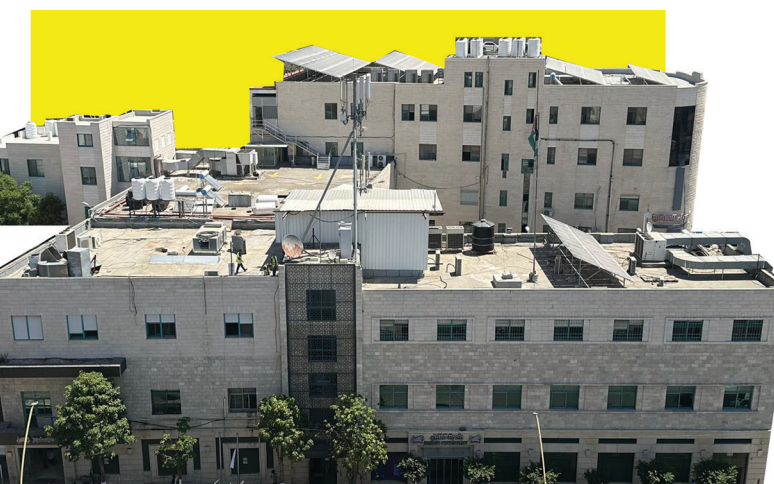
The participants in front of the 'Haus der Statistik' in Berlin



Presentation of ZUSammenKUNFT Berlin on the 'Haus der Statistik' site



Presentation of the town hall building in Hebron during the dialogue event



Hebron's town hall building in 2024



Modernised residential buildings in Greifswald, similar to the buildings in Drohobych, Ukraine

The current town hall in **Hebron**, in the Palestinian territories, was built in 1930, and had a number of uses, including as a museum, up until 1965. Since then, the building has been repeatedly extended, converted to new uses and modernised. For example, it has been insulated to improve energy efficiency, been made accessible for people with disabilities, and fire safety has been improved. The aim for the citizens' service area was to create an open and friendly environment and establish a 'one-stop shop': a place where citizens can take care of all their official business.

In **Lusaka**, in Zambia, many former community centre buildings are in a poor condition. There is a danger that they will be bought up by investors and demolished to make way for buildings such as shopping centres. Lusaka City Council, on the other hand, wishes to renovate the buildings and continue using them as early years education centres, to improve the quality and quantity of its educational provision for children. In collaboration with both civil society and development policy stakeholders, a community centre is being renovated as a pilot project.

*"Without the involvement of local residents, it is difficult to gain acceptance for an urban development project."*

Bwalya Funga, Lusaka City Council, Zambia

In **Greifswald**, Germany, industrialisation and population growth in the 1970s in the GDR led to many new residential buildings being constructed with prefabricated parts. Two of these buildings have been modernised to meet current standards of comfort, energy efficiency and quality of life. Particular emphasis was placed on an integrative approach, to avoid social divisions. The residents were closely involved in the planning to ensure that the modernisation measures also meet their needs.

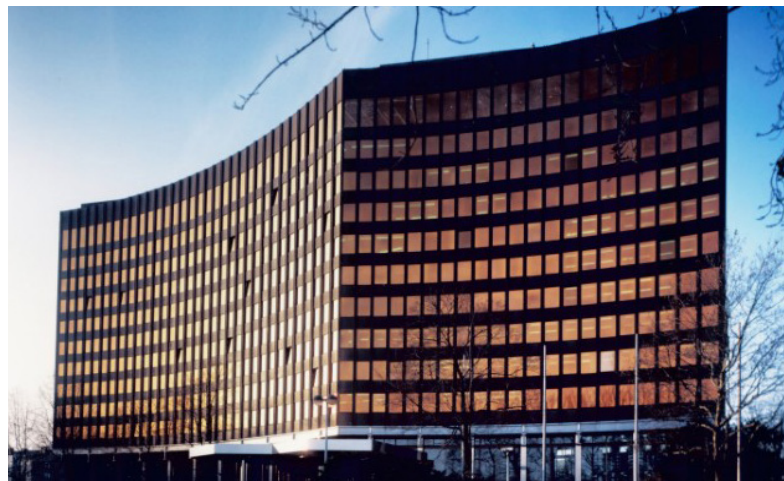


The Ukrainian City of **Drohobych** has many residential buildings constructed in the 1950s and 60s, during the Soviet era, which were not intended to last more than about 50 years. To make continued use of these buildings as sustainable as possible, some have already been renovated, with a focus on energy efficiency, including the installation of photovoltaic panels. Support for the modernisation has come from several sources, including from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the European Union.

In **Cologne**, Germany, a private investor has converted the former headquarters of the Federation of German Industries (BDI) into a residential building with 132 residential units. The façade of this curved 1970s high-rise block has been renovated, balconies added, and an additional storey added to the building. The fundamental structure and the stairwells have been retained, and the building has been adapted to meet modern requirements for accessibility, fire safety and energy consumption. According to the investor, the conversion was only economically viable because, in addition to the tower block, the entire site was developed as a shell development (residential use).

A 25-storey tower block built in the centre of **Nairobi** (Kenya) in the 1960s has served as a Hilton Hotel from 1969 to 2022. Since then, it has stood unused, despite the pressing need for residential space in Nairobi. Only the ground floor is occupied, housing a number of businesses. The building is owned jointly by the Kenyan government and Hilton International. Three ideas for repurposing the building are currently being investigated: student accommodation; residential space for single people or small families; or office space. Short-term 'quick-win' solutions for using the building are also under discussion.

In 2022, the city of **Regensburg**, Germany, acquired a building constructed between 1978 and 1980, with the intention of converting it to serve the City Council as a third town hall. This project will help to meet Regensburg's goals of continuing to use existing properties instead of building new ones, and of becoming climate neutral by 2035. The plan is to retain as many constructional elements of the building as possible, for example the clinker façade, while the conversion will make the building as energy-efficient as possible. The flexible structure will enable a resource-saving conversion of the room layout.



The Flow Tower in Cologne before and after the refurbishment



The Hilton Hotel in Nairobi, Kenya



The town hall building in Regensburg



## Challenges – solutions – project ideas

Planning for the continued use of older public buildings requires reconciling various interests: Repurposing or converting a building must be economically viable and socially appealing in the environment where the property is located; it must meet sustainability requirements such as energy efficiency, comply with modern safety standards, and take into consideration aspects such as preservation of architectural heritage.

Residents, the neighbourhood that will be affected, and civil society stakeholders should all be involved in the planning process to ensure their needs and concerns are considered as much as possible. Transparent and solution-oriented communication with all stakeholders – including via social media, where many people can be easily reached – is vital for the success of such projects.

The repurposing or conversion also needs to fit with the municipality's overall urban planning approach. For example: is the need primarily for residential space, or does the area need spaces for social and educational facilities? How can a building serve multifunctional purposes, bringing multiple needs under one roof?



Peer-to-peer consultation on current challenges

*“Every urban planning project needs a good storyline that emphasises the positive aspects and puts critiques in perspective.”*

Christoph Peytard, City of Regensburg

If existing buildings are sold to private investors for modernisation, or are renovated within a Public-Private Partnership (PPP), it is helpful if municipalities are able to stipulate specific uses or standards in the contract. Berlin has abandoned its previous privatisation policy, and is now buying back properties because this is more cost-effective in the long term. The Senate Department has set out defined guidelines for PPP contracts.

Analysis of current challenges in a plenary session above the rooftops of Berlin



## OPTIMISING THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS: DEMOLITION OR RENOVATION?

### German reuse examples

The decision to renovate or demolish a 1960s or 70s building requires a comprehensive process which considers criteria such as the existing structure and local building regulations. It would be helpful to devise a tool to standardise the decision-making process in this context, accelerating it and making it more transparent. The tool could also be used to show the public the arguments, such as technical facts and expert assessments, on which the decision to demolish or renovate is based.

*“When a large building stands empty long term, this often has a negative effect on the whole neighbourhood. These buildings need to be given a new lease of life, particularly in inner city locations.”*

Godfrey Ngugi, Nairobi City County Assembly

## PLANNING THE INTERIM USE OF AN EMPTY BUILDING

### Example: the former Hilton Hotel in Nairobi (Kenya)

If the decision on what to do with a vacant building in (partial) public ownership can only be made in the long term, municipalities can make provision for temporary interim use. Suitable uses would include spaces for art, education and culture, storage areas or retail units – all of which require little to no investment. To help define the interim use more precisely, city councils should gather ideas from various stakeholders such as the local population, politicians and private investors. They should develop a communications strategy for this, along with an associated concept paper to convince the owners of the advantages of interim use.

## OPENING MUNICIPAL BUILDINGS TO THE PUBLIC

### Example: Hebron town hall (Palestinian territories)

Municipal buildings should have a public use. This is a factor that should be considered when renovating existing buildings. For example, if a city does not contain enough spaces for social, cultural and civil society activities, for education or business development, the opportunity to renovate should make provision for spaces for these purposes. The premises of civic services should also be open and customer-oriented. To ensure that such projects also meet the needs of the population, it is vital to involve a variety of stakeholders in the planning process. Often, the first step in achieving this is to improve trust in the city council.

### Key takeaways

- Since existing buildings embody a large amount of grey (or golden) energy, repurposing or conversion is almost always preferable to demolition from a climate policy perspective.
- Thanks to their design, buildings from the 1960s and 70s are often highly suitable for a change of room layout and adaptation to today's requirements – for example, for work spaces.
- Feasibility studies will offer clarity on whether repurposing is economically viable, and for which purposes and with what objectives.
- If the renovation of an entire large building complex is not possible, parts of the building could initially be taken on as a pilot project. An interim use as part of the city's cultural scene is better than leaving a building to stand empty.
- The local population and civil society stakeholders should be involved in projects to repurpose existing buildings, so that their needs can be integrated into the planning process. A stakeholder analysis should be prepared to facilitate this. In addition, transparent communication among all stakeholders, based on a solid communication strategy, is essential.



## IMPRINT

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## Connective Cities

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