



HERITAGE RE:START

Revitalizing Europe's Sites Through Action, Restoration and Training

Practical Toolkit for Community-Driven Heritage Reuse

A practical guide for turning historical
and underused buildings into living
spaces for the community

Developed by:

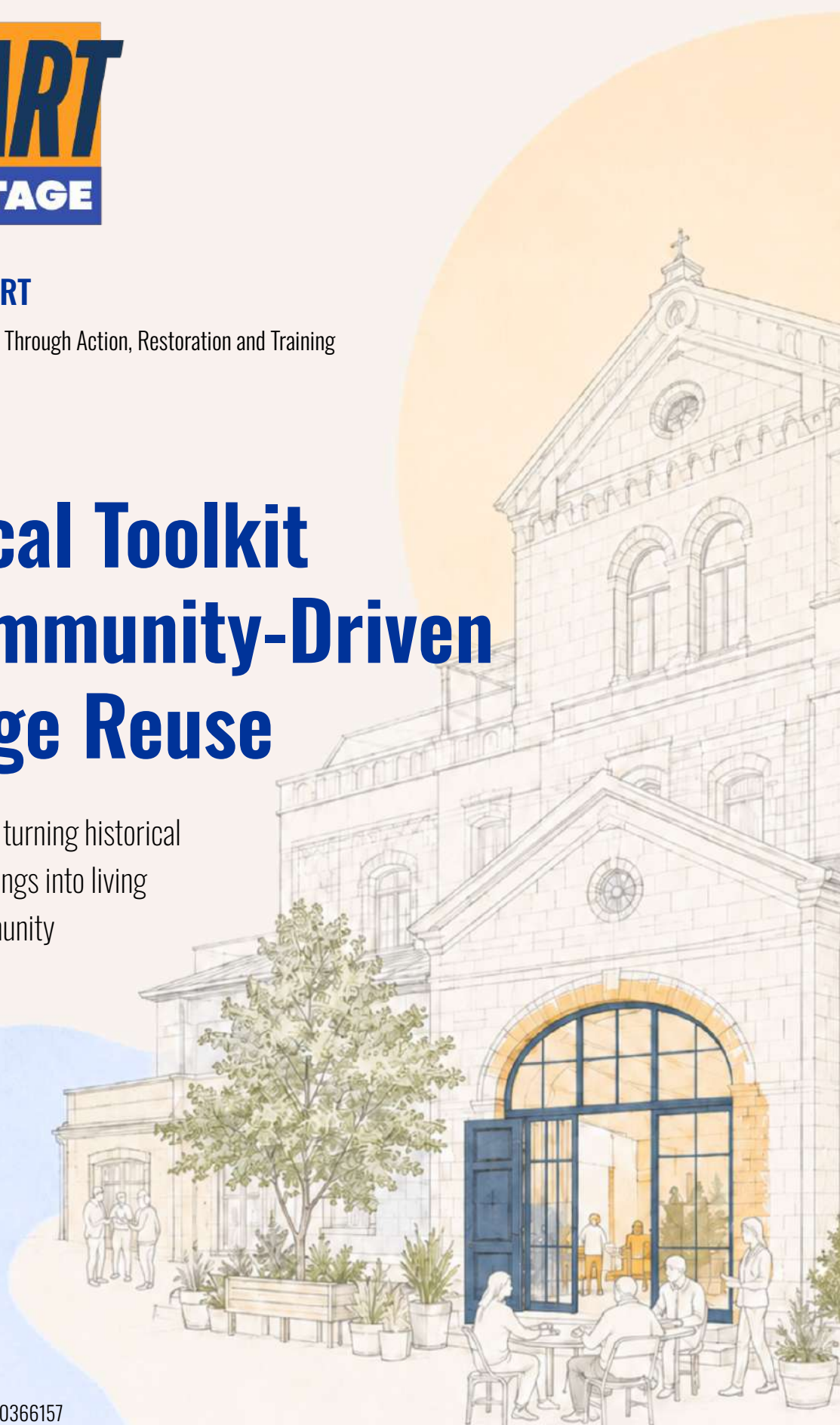
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Project Reference:

2025-1-DE02-KA210-ADU-000366157



Co-funded by
the European Union



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Acknowledgements

We would like to warmly thank all the people, organisations and initiatives who contributed to HERITAGE RE:START by sharing their time, experience and reflections. Their practical knowledge helped us better understand the realities of heritage reuse: the hopes, difficulties, responsibilities and choices involved in giving new life to historical and underused places.

This toolkit was shaped by interviews, study visits, desk research, partner discussions and informal exchanges with people working in different contexts in France and Germany. We are especially grateful to those who welcomed the project team, answered questions, shared documents, opened their spaces, or allowed their experience to be included as a source of learning for others.

The initiatives and organisations mentioned, visited, interviewed, or used as sources of inspiration include:

La Minoterie de Gardouch; Build, Share & Repair; La Colo du Cagire; Haus der Weimarer Republik; Centre Socio-Culturel Nelson Mandela; Burg Lohra; Les Halles de la Cartoucherie; Le Rucher Portésien; Les Alouettes; Église du Gesù; Chapelle Saint-Jacques; Le Château d'Eau; Schloss Goseck; Schloss Bothmer; Alter Schlachthof Erfurt; Saline 34; JederKann; Schloss Weitersroda; Schloss zur fröhlichen Wiederkunft; Burg Gleichenstein; Leergutagent*innen e. V.; and Interessengemeinschaft Privater Burgen, Schlösser & Gutshäuser in Thüringen e. V.

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or Nationale Agentur Bildung für Europa beim Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung (NA beim BIBB). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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I. Introduction

Historical buildings are an important part of Europe's territories. For many communities, these buildings are not only physical structures – they carry architectural, cultural and social value. They are landmarks that help people recognise where they come from and how their territory has changed over time.

Yet many of these places now face an uncertain future. Economic change, demographic shifts, the cost of maintenance, ownership difficulties, and the lack of adapted long-term use have left many historic or formerly important buildings degraded or at risk of abandonment. This creates practical and social questions for local actors: *Who is responsible for them? What should they become? How can they be maintained? How can they serve communities today without losing what makes them meaningful?*

A. About the Heritage RE:START project

The Heritage RE:START project was developed in response to these questions. Heritage RE:START (Revitalizing Europe's Sites Through Action, Restoration and Training) is a cooperation project between Stiftung Burg Tannroda in Germany and Association Petite Graine in France. The project emerged from a shared observation in the regions of Thuringia and Occitanie: both territories are rich in heritage, but many historical places need new functions if they are to remain active parts of local life.



Albi, Occitanie, France (Source: Pexels)

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In Thuringia, castles, former estates, industrial sites and other historic buildings are strongly present in the landscape. Some have already been transformed into cultural and educational spaces, community initiatives, social enterprises, or mixed-use projects. Others remain difficult to maintain because of financial, technical, or bureaucratic challenges. In Occitanie, similar questions appear in areas where former schools, religious buildings, industrial sites, and other places are being reimagined by the communities.

The project was made possible through European support for cooperation in the field of adult education. This framework allowed partners from France and Germany to exchange experiences, compare different contexts, and develop learning resources that can be useful beyond the immediate partnership. Heritage RE:START is part of a wider European effort to encourage cooperation, civic participation, lifelong learning and local innovation in response to shared territorial challenges.



Saline 34, Erfurt - Thuringia

The starting point of the project is simple: heritage reuse is not only about preserving old buildings. It is also about creating living places that respond to present needs. A historical building can become more than a protected

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monument or a symbol of the past. It can become a space for learning, cultural exchange, ecological transition, and other meaningful initiatives.

This perspective is especially relevant in a period marked by ecological, social, and territorial transitions. Across Europe, communities are looking for more sustainable, inclusive and locally rooted ways of organising collective life. Heritage buildings can contribute to this, not because they offer ready-made solutions, but because they can become anchors for new forms of cooperation.

At the same time, heritage reuse is rarely simple. The initiatives explored during the project show that transforming a building requires more than motivation. It involves questions of ownership, safety, funding, governance, technical knowledge, community involvement, long-term maintenance and public usefulness. Some projects grow gradually through volunteer work and small steps. Others depend on public investment, cooperative structures, private commitment, professional management, or complex partnerships. In every case, the future of a place depends on the relationship between the building, the people involved, the needs of the territory, and the resources that can realistically be mobilised.

B. About the Toolkit

This toolkit is one of the main outcomes of that process. It has been designed as a resource for associations, local stakeholders, educators, cultural actors, and others who are interested in the reuse of historical or underused buildings. It does not propose a universal model, because no universal model exists. Instead, this toolkit provides structured inspiration and practical guidance.

More specifically, the toolkit pursues four main objectives:

1. *First*, it documents and shares the main lessons developed throughout the project.
2. *Second*, it presents concrete examples of heritage reuse initiatives from different contexts.
3. *Third*, it identifies recurring challenges, success factors and strategic questions that can shape such processes.
4. *Fourth*, it offers practical tools and guidance that readers can adapt to their own situation.

The pages that follow are therefore both analytical and practical. Particular attention is given to the diversity of organisational models encountered throughout the engagement and project process. The toolkit also looks at how different actors have approached key issues of financing, governance, and sustainability.

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More broadly, Heritage RE:START is based on the idea that heritage reuse is not only about conservation. It is also about transmission, adaptation and collective imagination. It asks how inherited places can continue to matter, and how communities can give them new relevance without erasing their history. This toolkit aims to make heritage reuse more understandable, more accessible and more actionable for local actors.

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II. What We Learned

The Heritage RE:START project brought together several forms of learning: desk research, interviews, focus groups, study visits, partner discussions and direct observation of initiatives in France and Germany.

1. **Future use requires more than symbolic importance.** A historical building may have architectural, symbolic or emotional importance, but this alone does not guarantee its future. To remain active, it needs a contemporary role. It needs people who use it, care for it, understand it and give it meaning. It also needs a structure that allows the project to survive beyond the first phase of enthusiasm.
2. **Successful heritage reuse requires balance.** Across the examples studied, one strong pattern became visible: successful heritage reuse requires a balance between the identity of the place, the needs of the community and a realistic operating model. Projects that focus only on restoration risk becoming financially fragile. Projects that focus only on economic use risk losing their heritage meaning. Projects that respond to community needs but lack structure may become dependent on a small number of overcommitted individuals.

The most promising initiatives are not necessarily the largest, the most expensive, or the most professionally branded. They are the ones that manage to connect a place with a purpose.

A. Key findings from the project

Heritage buildings need a clear contemporary purpose

One of the clearest findings is that historic buildings become more sustainable when they are given a clear role in the present. This does not mean that each building must have only one function. In fact, many successful initiatives combine several uses. But the overall purpose of the place needs to fit the context of the community and modern times..

Some places become cultural centres. Others become learning spaces, community hubs, cafés, coworking spaces, museums, workshops, event venues, or mixed-use places. In Germany, several examples illustrated this clearly:

- Schloss Bothmer was restored as a museum, cultural venue and visitor destination.
- Schloss Goseck became a European music and cultural centre.
- Burg Lohra developed around seminars, group stays, volunteer workcamps, concerts and workshops.

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- The Haus der Weimarer Republik became a civic education centre and public space for democratic learning.



Schloss Bothmer (Source: Pexels)

In France, the same principle appeared in different forms.

- Les Halles de la Cartoucherie in Toulouse turned a former military-industrial site into a large hybrid space for food, culture, sports, work and social life.
- La Minoterie de Gardouch transformed an abandoned mill into a rural third place combining a café, coworking, local food, cultural events and community activities.
- La Colo du Cagire showed how a former holiday colony could become a collectively owned place for learning, creation, work, social life and experimentation.

These examples are very different, but they share one lesson: the future of a heritage site depends on the role it can play today. The past gives the place identity, but the present gives it use.

There is no single model of successful reuse

The project also showed that there is no universal model for heritage reuse. The initiatives studied followed very different pathways. Some projects were led by public authorities. Others were led by associations, cooperatives, private owners, foundations, informal collectives, or mixed partnerships. Some depended on

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major public investment. Others began with volunteer work, private commitment, direct community support, small grants, or step-by-step renovation.

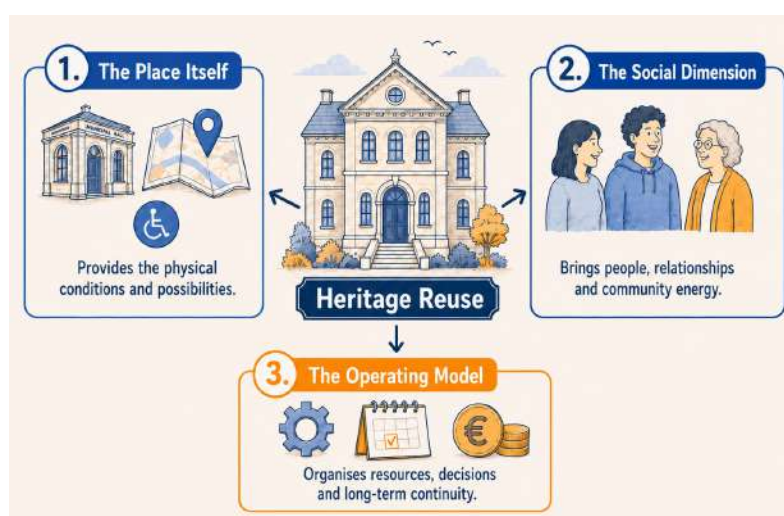
This diversity is important. It prevents heritage reuse from being understood as a fixed formula. A rural castle, a former school, a chapel, an industrial hall, a mill and a small workshop do not face the same constraints. Their ownership structures, technical needs, financial possibilities, legal obligations and potential users are different.

However, this does not mean that every project is completely unique. Across the different examples, similar questions arose repeatedly: the use of the place, the people involved, the financial model, the governance structure, the relationship with public authorities, the role of the local community, and the capacity to maintain the building over time.

The models differ, but the underlying challenges often meet.

Heritage reuse works best when it connects place, people and model

The examples explored through the project suggest that heritage reuse depends on three dimensions.



Three dimensions of heritage reuse (illustrated by OpenAI)

- 1. The place itself:** Every building has its own material reality: condition, ownership, location, size, accessibility, restrictions, energy needs, renovation costs, etc. These factors shape what can realistically happen.
- 2. The social dimension:** A place needs people: users, neighbours, volunteers, visitors, tenants, partners, public authorities, funders, local organisations, or residents. Even a technically well-restored building may remain fragile if it does not build relationships with people.
- 3. The operating model:** This includes governance, finance, staffing, programming, maintenance, communication and long-term responsibility.

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It is the structure that allows the initiative to move from an idea to something that can last.

When these dimensions are not aligned, tensions appear. A beautiful building may be too expensive for the planned use. A motivated group may lack the technical or administrative capacity to manage the project. A financially attractive activity may not serve the community. A socially useful project may not generate enough income to cover maintenance.

This balance does not have to be perfect from the beginning. Many initiatives develop gradually.

The process can be as important as the final result

Another important learning is that heritage reuse is not only about the finished building. The transformation process itself can create value.

Many initiatives cannot wait until the site is fully restored before becoming active. In fact, waiting for a perfect final version may delay action for years. Temporary activities, open days, volunteer workcamps, pilot events, small workshops, partial uses and public visits can already create engagement.

The process can become educational and participatory. People can discover the building, understand its challenges, contribute to its future and follow its evolution. They are not only invited to consume a final result; they can become part of the story.

This was visible in several initiatives. In La Minoterie de Gardouch, activities were tested before the full opening of the site, helping the association build a local dynamic and involve residents. In volunteer-based restoration projects, the act of repairing, cleaning, building or maintaining can itself become a form of learning and community-building. In small initiatives such as Build, Share & Repair in Erfurt, practical work is not only a service, but a way to create relationships.

Reuse often requires hybrid models

The project confirmed the importance of hybrid models. Most heritage reuse initiatives cannot rely on a single activity or a single source of support.

Many successful initiatives combine different functions and resources rather than relying entirely on one activity. These may include utilizing the place for a combination of rentals, workshops, coworking, cultural events, cafés, public funding, donations, membership fees, tourism, educational activities, volunteer work, services, partnerships, and so on.

The German interviews with castle and palace owners were clear on this point. They showed that long-term preservation often depends on a realistic financial

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model. French examples also showed the value of hybrid approaches. Third places often combine social, cultural, educational and economic activities. Cooperative or community-led projects may combine private contributions, public funding, volunteer work and revenue-generating activities.

B. Identified successes and positive factors

Strong local anchoring increases relevance

The most convincing initiatives are deeply connected to their territory. They do not treat the building as an isolated object, but as part of a local ecosystem.

The Centre socio-cultural Nelson Mandela in Luchon offers an example: A former school became a shared socio-cultural centre hosting youth work, associations, social support and cultural activities. The project did not depend on a spectacular transformation. Its strength lies in the fact that it kept a central building active and useful for local life.

La Minoterie de Gardouch also shows the importance of local anchoring. The project responded to the condition of an abandoned mill, but also to the need for a rural meeting place, local food links, cultural programming and collective activity. Its relevance comes from this connection between the building and the community around it.

A heritage reuse project becomes stronger when people can say: *"This place is useful for us."*

Community involvement is a real resource

Community involvement was one of the most important success factors identified. People need concrete ways to become involved. They may participate as volunteers, members, visitors, decision-makers, etc. The forms of involvement can vary, but they need to be visible and understandable.

La Colo du Cagire is a strong example of community mobilisation. The collective purchase model and shared governance approach made the project more than the reuse of a building. It became a common undertaking, supported by people who wanted to protect a place and give it a future.

Build, Share & Repair in Erfurt showed another form of participation. People come to repair, build, borrow tools, learn from each other and spend time together. Community is created through practical activity.

These examples suggest that participation becomes powerful when people do not only attend activities, but also recognise themselves in the project.

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Partnerships increase capacity

Partnerships appeared as another major enabling factor. Heritage reuse projects often require more skills and resources than one actor can provide alone. Partnerships can provide funding, technical expertise, legitimacy, visibility, equipment, users and political support. They also reduce isolation. This matters because heritage reuse can be a long and demanding process.

The examples studied show that partnerships work best when they are built around a shared purpose, not only around convenience. The project needs to be clear enough for partners to understand what they are contributing to. Roles should also be realistic.

Storytelling and communication help build support

The research also showed that communication is not secondary but is a core part of the project's development.

A heritage reuse initiative needs to explain what is happening, why it matters and how people can take part. This may happen through many communication channels such as social media, local press, open days, public meetings, newsletters, posters, guided visits, informal conversations or local events, just to name a few.

Communication is especially important because heritage buildings often carry strong emotions. People may have memories attached to the place. They may also have concerns about its future: privatisation, exclusion, noise, loss of heritage value, public spending, commercialisation, or changes in neighbourhood life. Transparent communication helps address these concerns.

The project also showed that people are often interested in the transformation process itself. They want to know what was discovered, what was repaired, who was involved, what difficulties appeared, and what the next steps are. The story of the building can become a crucial way to gather support.

This does not require large communication budgets. Small initiatives can communicate effectively if they are consistent, authentic and clear.

Professionalism supports long-term survival

Another enabling factor is professionalism. This does not mean that every project must become formal, commercial or institutional. It means that there is a need for clear agreements, realistic budgets, reliable communication and documentation, safety awareness, follow-up, and defined responsibilities.

The German interviews strongly highlighted this point. Several owners and practitioners explained that heritage projects require economic thinking,

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administrative capacity, and technical knowledge. Without these, even passionate projects can become fragile.

Professionalism should not remove the human and collective dimension of the project. On the contrary, it should protect it. Good structures help prevent exhaustion, confusion, and conflict – allowing the organization and the initiative to move forward even if important people take a step back.

C. Challenges and barriers identified

High restoration and maintenance costs

The most obvious challenge is cost. Historic buildings often require significant resources for restoration, safety, accessibility, heating, insurance and maintenance. Even when a building is acquired cheaply or made available by a public authority, the real cost often appears later.

Renovation can reveal unexpected structural problems so technical studies may be needed. For instance, energy performance may be difficult to improve. Fire safety and accessibility can be expensive, especially if the building is intended to welcome the public.

Long-term maintenance is equally important. A building that is repaired once but not maintained will become fragile again. This is why reserves, maintenance planning and realistic financial projections are essential.

Funding is often fragmented and temporary

Funding is essential for many heritage reuse initiatives, but it can also be difficult to manage. Grants may be limited to specific activities, investment costs or time periods. Some funders only fund specific aspects of the project, for example support and renovation but not coordination. Meanwhile, others support events but not building maintenance. Administrative and organisational work are also often underfunded, even though it is necessary.

This creates pressure on project teams. People may spend large amounts of unpaid time writing applications, managing reporting, contacting authorities, coordinating volunteers or preparing documentation.

Another issue is dependence. If a project relies too heavily on one funder, it may become vulnerable when that support ends.

Funding is key in making projects possible, but it should be connected to a broader sustainability strategy.

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Bureaucracy and regulation can slow down projects

Heritage reuse often involves complex administrative and legal requirements, such as building permits, heritage protection, fire safety, insurance, environmental rules, and financial reporting.

These requirements exist for important reasons, but they can be difficult for small organisations to navigate. Procedures may take longer than expected, and dealing with different authorities and technical language may be difficult.

Several examples showed that relationships with authorities matter. Bureaucracy should be treated as part of the project, not as an external detail. Hence, time and capacity must be taken into account.

Community engagement requires time and structure

Community engagement is often presented as a solution, but it is also a challenge. Participation needs structure. People need to know how to join, what they can influence, what responsibilities they can take, and how decisions are made. Without this clarity, participation can become confusing or symbolic.

Projects should also be careful not to rely too heavily on unpaid work. Volunteer involvement is valuable, but it should not hide the real amount of labour needed. If a project depends entirely on a few overcommitted people, it may not be sustainable.

Marketing and audience development are often underestimated

Some heritage reuse initiatives assume that the building itself will attract visitors, users or supporters. This may happen at the beginning, especially if the site has strong local visibility. But long-term engagement usually requires regular communication, clear programming and audience development.

A useful lesson from the research is that communication does not have to be expensive, but it does need to be strategic. The project should know who it wants to reach, what message it wants to share, and how people can become involved.

Personal overload is a real risk

One of the most important and sometimes least visible challenges is the pressure placed on the people behind the projects..

The German interviews highlighted burnout, financial stress, emotional fatigue and the difficulty of maintaining large heritage sites over time. Smaller community projects can face similar problems, even if the scale is different.

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A sustainable project needs to care for the people who carry it. This means sharing responsibility, creating realistic timelines, recognising work, developing skills, setting boundaries and planning succession. A project should not depend entirely on heroic effort.

D. Main lessons learned for future initiatives

Based on the struggles and challenges, there are 10 lessons that we can learn from to execute and implement successful heritage reuse projects:



10 Lessons for Heritage Projects (illustrated by OpenAI)

Lesson 1: Start from the building, but do not stop there

The future of the project cannot be based only on the building. It must also be connected to people's needs, local identity, and possible uses. The key question goes beyond saving the building, but making it more useful and sustainable.

Lesson 2: Identify a clear purpose before multiplying activities

Many reused heritage sites host several activities. This can make them more resilient. However, diversity should not become confusion.

Before adding too many activities, the project needs a clear purpose:

1. *What is the place for?*
2. *Who does it serve?*
3. *What kind of impact should it create?*

Once this direction is clear, different activities can support it and make it overall coherent.

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Lesson 3: Develop a hybrid model early

The project strongly supports the idea of hybrid models. This can mean combining different uses, different income sources, different types of partners, or different governance tools.

A heritage site may need cultural programming and rentals, public support and private income, volunteer work and professional coordination, community access and paid services. The right combination depends on the local context.

Lesson 4: Build community through action

Community support grows when people can experience the project directly. For instance, you can do a clean-up day, workshop, shared meal, guided visit, or any small pilot activity that can help people feel more connected to the project.

Lesson 5: Think in phases

Many heritage reuse projects are too complex to complete at once. Trying to solve everything immediately can create financial, administrative and emotional pressure.

A phased approach allows the project to grow step by step. One room can be opened before the whole building is restored. One activity can be tested before a full programme is launched. One partnership can be built before a larger network is formalised.

This enables learning to see what works and which areas need adjustment.

Lesson 6: Make governance visible

Governance should not remain hidden and it doesn't have to be complicated. People involved in the project need to understand how decisions are made, who is responsible for what, and how conflicts or disagreements can be addressed.

This is especially important when a project involves volunteers, public authorities, funders, residents, tenants, partners or shared ownership. Clear governance protects trust.

Lesson 7: Treat finance as part of the project vision

Financial planning should not be seen as separate from the values of the project. Just because it's a social mission, does not mean it doesn't need a financial budget. Having such, shapes the project's legitimacy, what it can do, who can access it, what risks it takes, and how long it can survive.

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Lesson 8: Communicate regularly and honestly

Communication should begin early and continue throughout the project. It should show the process, the challenges, the people involved and the next steps.

Honest communication builds trust. It can also attract volunteers, partners, visitors and funders. It helps people understand that heritage reuse is not a simple transformation, but a long process made of progress, obstacles and decisions.

Lesson 9: Prepare for complexity

It's important to expect that heritage reuse involves uncertainty in terms of costs, permits, partnerships, and funding. Expecting such allows you to be prepared.

Good preparation includes technical advice, legal clarity, financial margins where possible, documentation, realistic timelines and strong relationships with relevant stakeholders.

Lesson 10: Protect the people carrying the project

The people behind heritage reuse initiatives are often deeply committed. Their dedication is one of the greatest strengths of the field. But long-term success cannot depend only on sacrifice.

Projects need to create conditions that allow people to continue without burning out. This includes sharing tasks, recognising invisible work, developing skills, creating support networks and accepting that rest is part of sustainability.

E. Conclusion: from heritage sites to living places

There is no single formula for heritage reuse, as will be illustrated by the case studies below. Some projects are large and highly structured, while others are modest and experimental. Some are public, while others are private or community-led. What they share is the attempt to give inherited places a renewed role in the present.

Generally, conditions that allow heritage sites projects to turn into active community resources are when they are connected to purpose, people, and sustainable care.

With the changing times, it isn't just important to preserve what already exists. The sites should create spaces for learning, culture, cooperation, local development, social connection and collective imagination. It can help communities see old buildings not only as fragile monuments or financial burdens, but as places where new forms of activity can emerge.

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The lessons gathered in this section form the basis for the rest of the toolkit. The following case studies show how different initiatives have approached these challenges in practice. The practical guide and tools then translate these lessons into questions, steps and templates that readers can adapt to their own context.

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III. Case Studies

The following case studies present a selection of initiatives explored through Heritage RE:START. They are not intended to form a complete catalogue of all the projects researched during the partnership. Instead, they were selected because they illustrate different ways of reusing heritage or underused buildings. The aim is to show diversity between the initiatives.

Each case should therefore be read as an example, not as a model to copy exactly. The value of these case studies lies in the questions they open, the choices they reveal and the practical lessons they offer. A project in another territory will always need to adapt its approach to its own building, community, resources and legal context.

A. How to read the case studies

The examples below are not presented as perfect success stories. This is important because heritage reuse is a continuous process of adaptation. Each case study is organised around a few core elements: the context of the place, the way the initiative started, the current use, the governance or operating model, the main challenges, and the lessons that may be useful for other actors.

The case studies should help readers identify possible approaches, such as:

1. starting with temporary or partial uses before full renovation
2. involving residents through practical activities
3. combining several functions in one place
4. creating partnerships between public authorities and local actors
5. building financial resilience through hybrid models
6. keeping heritage meaningful while adapting it to contemporary needs

They should also help readers recognise common risks: unclear governance, unrealistic budgets, overdependence on a single person, weak communication, or underestimation of maintenance costs.

The following cases are therefore both sources of inspiration and points of reflection.

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B. Burg Tannroda, Germany

A castle as a cultural, educational and community resource



Burg Tannroda

Burg Tannroda is located in Thuringia, Germany. It is central to the Heritage RE:START project because Stiftung Burg Tannroda is one of the project partners. The foundation is dedicated to the restoration and revitalisation of the historic castle.

Beyond being a historical monument, the site includes several dimensions: restoration work, educational uses, cultural programming, the Thuringian Basket Weaving Museum, community initiatives and links to sustainability practices such as permaculture and land-based activities.

During the project, Burg Tannroda also served as a study-visit site. Participants were able to experience the castle directly and observe how heritage reuse can involve several small projects at the same time.

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What makes it relevant

Burg Tannroda is relevant because it shows the complexity of reusing a large historical site while keeping a strong community and educational purpose. The case illustrates the importance of long-term commitment. Restoring and maintaining a castle cannot be done quickly. It requires patience, technical knowledge, fundraising, partnerships, volunteer engagement and realistic phasing.

Burg Tannroda also shows how a heritage site can combine preservation with contemporary uses. The building remains connected to its history, but it also hosts learning, cultural life, social initiatives and local experimentation.

Challenges

- Large historic buildings require continuous maintenance and investment. Different parts of the site may be at different stages of usability. Safety, accessibility, heating and technical standards can limit activities.
- Coordination. When a site includes workshops and activities, community engagement and responsibilities need to be clear.
- There is also the human challenge. Projects of this scale often depend on a small number of committed people. Without it, there is a risk of overload.

Lessons for others

1. Large heritage sites need phased development. It is rarely possible to restore everything before beginning to use the place. Instead, activities can develop gradually around available spaces and resources.
2. There is value in combining heritage preservation with learning. A castle can become a place where people do not only observe history, but also learn through workshops promoting visitor involvement.
3. Ambition must be connected to long-term care. The vision of a living heritage site is powerful, but it needs structures, partners, and finances to survive.

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C. La Minoterie de Gardouch, France

A rural mill transformed into a community third place



La Minoterie de Gardouch (Photo: Hubert Lorient)

La Minoterie de Gardouch is located in Gardouch, in Occitanie, near the Canal du Midi. The initiative is based in a former flour mill that had been abandoned for several decades. The building was part of local economic and social history, but over time it had lost its function and was at risk of continuing to deteriorate.

The project began when local residents recognised the potential of the site. Rather than seeing the mill only as an old building in poor condition, they imagined it as a place that could respond to current needs in the territory. The initiative developed through the association Canal Coop', which became the main structure for organising the project, gathering people, testing activities and building support.

La Minoterie is now a rural third place. It brings together several functions: a cultural and associative café, local food activities, coworking, shared rooms, workshops, events and community programming.

What makes it relevant

La Minoterie is especially relevant because it shows how rural heritage can become a support for local life. The project does not treat the old mill as a monument to be preserved separately from the community. It gives the site a

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practical role in the present, making it more connected to everyday life. The initiative responds to several needs at once: access to culture, social connection, local food, shared workspaces, collective activities and local identity.

Challenges

- Renovation is technically and administratively complex, especially when the site is located in a sensitive or protected environment.
- Because of the many forms of activities, the project also required continuous coordination, because a third place depends on people, programming, and daily management.
- Funding must combine different sources, including public support, private commitment, crowdfunding, loans, volunteer work, and ongoing activity income.
- Another challenge is scale. A place that is successful may quickly generate more demand than the team can easily manage. This is a common issue for community-based projects.

Lessons for others

1. La Minoterie shows that a heritage reuse project can begin before the building is fully transformed. Temporary activities, public meetings, small experiments and collective working groups can prepare the ground for long-term use.
2. There is value in a hybrid programme. A café, coworking space, cultural programme, local food initiative and community room may each have limits on their own, but together they make for a more active space.
3. Connect the building to local needs from the beginning. Understanding people's needs and the available resources makes the building more purposeful and sustainable.

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D. Build, Share & Repair, Germany

Empty garages transformed into a self-help workshop



Build, Share & Repair (Photo: Peter Müller)

Build, Share & Repair, often referred to as BSR, is a self-help workshop in northern Erfurt. It began in a group of old backyard garages that had been empty for many years. The founders recognised a simple but important local need: people needed access to tools, practical support and a non-commercial place to meet.

The initiative started informally and later became a non-profit association. Its activities include tool-sharing, bicycle repair, DIY support, repair sessions, informal gatherings, neighbourhood events and practical exchange. People come not only to repair objects, but also to learn from each other and spend time together.

The site itself is modest. It is not a prestigious monument or a major heritage building. Yet it is highly relevant for Heritage RE:START because it shows how underused spaces can be transformed through practical community action.

What makes it relevant

BSR expands the idea of heritage reuse. It reminds us that reuse is not only about castles, churches or famous buildings. Everyday spaces, such as garages, workshops, former service buildings or small industrial structures, can also become meaningful community resources.

The project is strong because it connects material reuse with social repair. Tools, objects and spaces are shared and knowledge circulates between users.

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The initiative also shows how low-cost models can work. Because the rent is low and the project relies on volunteer energy, donations and small grants, it can remain accessible. Its strength lies in being simple, local, and useful.

Challenges

- Dependence on the space and its owner. If agreements are unclear or unstable, the future of the initiative becomes uncertain.
- Infrastructure. The garages are limited in size and difficult to use in winter because of heating constraints. As the project grows, the available space may no longer match the demand.
- Volunteer capacity. A self-help workshop depends on people willing to open the space, support users, maintain tools, coordinate activities and manage internal group processes. This requires ongoing care.

Lessons for others

1. BSR shows that a project can begin from a very concrete need. The starting point was not an abstract vision of heritage reuse, but a practical question: where can people repair, build, borrow tools and learn together?
2. Small spaces can have large social value. A project does not need to begin with a fully renovated building or a major budget. It can begin with access, trust, shared tools, volunteer energy and a clear local purpose.
3. The case also offers an important warning: informal projects still need clear agreements. Low-cost does not mean low responsibility. The more a project grows, the more it needs structure.

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E. La Colo du Cagire, France

Community ownership and reuse of a former holiday colony



La Colo du Cagire (Source: Facebook)

La Colo du Cagire is located in Juzet-d'Izaut, in the mountain area of Occitanie. The site was formerly used as a holiday colony. After losing its original function, it became an opportunity for a group of people who wanted to protect the place and give it a new collective purpose.

The project is based on a strong community dynamic. A large group of supporters came together to make the acquisition and reuse of the site possible. This collective mobilisation is one of the most distinctive aspects of the initiative.

Today, La Colo hosts a variety of activities linked to culture, work, creation, social life and experimentation. Its rural and natural setting gives it a particular atmosphere: it is both a place of retreat and a place of activity. The initiative is still developing, which is also part of its interest. It shows heritage reuse as a living process, not as a finished product.

What makes it relevant

La Colo is relevant because it illustrates a strong community-led model. The project is built around the idea that a place can be protected and reactivated

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through collective commitment. This is especially important in rural contexts where public authorities may not always have the resources to save every building, and where private market solutions may not serve the common interest.

The initiative also shows how ownership and governance shape the meaning of a project. When people contribute to the future of a place, they are more likely to feel responsible for it. It shows that heritage preservation can be linked to new forms of solidarity and local organisation.

Challenges

- Shared ownership or shared governance requires strong internal organisation. Decisions must be made transparently. Responsibilities must be distributed and disagreements addressed.
- Financial sustainability. Community mobilisation can help acquire or launch a site, but the long-term operation still needs income, maintenance planning and management capacity. A large building or complex site can quickly create costs that exceed the first phase of enthusiasm.
- The project also needs to balance openness with structure. If the place wants to remain accessible to many uses and people, it must still define rules, priorities and responsibilities.

Lessons for others

1. La Colo shows the power of collective mobilisation. A building that may seem too large or too complex for one actor can become possible when a group builds shared commitment around it.
2. Financing is not only a technical issue. It can be social and political. When people contribute, in whatever form, they also help create legitimacy.
3. While there is power in collective mobilisation, it should still have structure. Collective energy should be accompanied by clear governance and realistic planning.

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F. Haus der Weimarer Republik, Germany

A heritage building as a civic education centre



Source: <https://the-passenger.de/2025/04/18/haus-der-weimarer-republik-weimar/>

The Haus der Weimarer Republik in Weimar is a civic education centre, museum and public forum dedicated to democratic learning and the history of the Weimar Republic. It shows how heritage reuse can connect a historic place with political education and public debate.

The site functions as a place where visitors can learn, discuss, interpret history and connect past experiences with present responsibilities. This educational function gives the building a strong public role.

What makes it relevant

This case highlights the link between heritage and civic engagement. Heritage reuse is often discussed in relation to culture, tourism, community activity or social enterprise. The Haus der Weimarer Republik adds another dimension: democratic education.

The project shows that a reused heritage site can become a place for public understanding. It can help people explore political history, democratic values, conflict, responsibility and participation. This is particularly relevant for adult education, because learning does not only happen in classrooms. It can happen in places that carry historical meaning and invite reflection.

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The case also demonstrates how a clear thematic focus can strengthen a project. The identity of the place, the content of the institution and the educational mission reinforce each other.

Challenges

- A civic education centre must remain relevant over time. It needs programming, mediation, exhibitions, public events, educational tools and communication that speak to contemporary audiences.
- Another challenge is accessibility. Democratic learning should reach diverse groups, so this requires outreach, partnerships with schools and organisations, and inclusive educational methods.
- There is also a need to balance historical interpretation with present-day relevance. The project must avoid reducing the site to a static museum while still respecting historical accuracy.

Lessons for others

1. Heritage reuse can support civic learning. A building linked to history can become a place where people reflect on present social and political questions.
2. A strong theme can give coherence to a reused site. When the building, the mission and the activities are aligned, the place becomes easier to understand and communicate.
3. Heritage reuse can contribute to public values, not only local development or economic activity. A reused building can become a space for democratic culture.

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G. Centre Socio-Culturel Nelson Mandela, France

A former school reused as a local socio-cultural centre



Source: Archello

The Centre Socio-Culturel Nelson Mandela is located in Luchon, in Occitanie. It is based in a former primary school in the historic town centre. Rather than leaving the building empty, the municipality repurposed it as a shared socio-cultural space.

The building now hosts several local actors and activities, including youth work, cultural activities, social support, a small library, associations and intergenerational initiatives. The reuse was relatively light compared to major heritage restoration projects. Not every reuse project needs to be spectacular. Some of the most useful transformations are those that keep a familiar building active and accessible for everyday community life.

What makes it relevant

This case is relevant because it shows a small-scale municipal model. A former educational building continues to serve an educational and social purpose, even if its function has changed. The classrooms no longer host the same school activities, but the building remains a place of learning, support and encounter.

The project also contributes to the life of the town centre. By hosting different associations and services, the building helps keep local activity present in a central location.

Challenges

- Shared use can create practical challenges. Different associations and users may have different schedules, needs and expectations. Communication and role assignments need to be clear.

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- Another challenge is visibility. Because the project is modest and locally rooted, it may not be recognised as an important example of heritage reuse.
- Dependence on municipal support. This can provide stability, but it also means that political priorities, budgets and administrative decisions can influence the future of the site.

Lessons for others

1. Reuse can still be achievable with limited intervention. A building does not always need a complete reinvention.
2. Heritage reuse can be built to support everyday social infrastructure. A reused building does not need to become a major destination to have impact. It can simply become a useful, accessible and welcoming place for the people who live nearby.

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H. Burg Lohra, Germany

Slow restoration and living heritage



Burg Lohra (Photo: Dima Antifeev)

Burg Lohra is an example of a heritage site shaped by gradual, ecological and participatory reuse. Rather than following a model of rapid, high-cost restoration, it has developed through long-term engagement, volunteer work, seminars, group stays, concerts, workshops and forms of low-impact restoration.

The case is interesting because it presents heritage as something lived and cared for over time. The site is not only a building to be restored. It is a place where people gather, work, stay, learn and contribute. This kind of approach is particularly relevant for projects that do not have immediate access to large investments.

What makes it relevant

Burg Lohra illustrates the idea of a “living heritage.” The value of the place is not limited to its architecture. It is also found in the activities, relationships and forms of care that take place there.

Voluntary engagement plays a key role. Workcamps, workshops, and group activities can support maintenance while also creating learning experiences. Participants do not simply observe restoration; they actively take part in it.

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The ecological dimension is key. Slow and careful renovation can invite reflection on materials, resources, energy, reversibility and the environmental impact of restoration choices. This is relevant in a context where heritage reuse must also respond to ecological transition.

Challenges

- A slow approach requires patience and such must be communicated clearly to the funders and relevant stakeholders. This is especially true if it relies heavily on volunteer labour.
- Another challenge is maintaining standards. Even when a project uses low-impact or gradual methods, it must still address safety, legal requirements and long-term preservation needs.
- There is also a risk that gradual development becomes unclear if the project does not communicate its direction. People need to understand that slow restoration is a strategy, not simply a lack of progress.

Lessons for others

1. Burg Lohra shows that heritage reuse does not always need to begin with complete renovation. A site can become active through careful phases, temporary uses, group stays, volunteer work and educational activities.
2. The case also shows that restoration can itself be a form of learning. When people participate in maintaining a place, they develop skills, attachment and understanding.
3. Time is still a resource. This is often taken for granted. Slow development can be a strength if it is intentional towards a clear long-term vision.

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I. Les Halles de la Cartoucherie, France

A former industrial site turned into a large urban ecosystem



Les Halles de la Cartoucherie (Source: Pinterest)

Les Halles de la Cartoucherie is located in Toulouse. The project is based in a former military-industrial site that has been transformed into a large mixed-use space. The scale of the initiative is very different from smaller rural or volunteer-led projects. It represents a more structured urban model of heritage reuse.

The site is not a single-use function. Instead, it operates as a hybrid ecosystem where different activities reinforce each other. This kind of project responds to the complexity of large urban heritage sites. After all, a major industrial building cannot usually be sustained by a single small activity. It needs a broader operating model.

What makes it relevant

Les Halles de la Cartoucherie is relevant because it shows how a large industrial heritage site can be reactivated as part of contemporary urban life, giving it a new public role.

The diversity of uses is one of its strongest features. Food attracts daily visitors. Cultural and sports activities bring different groups. Workspaces and events support regular use. Social economy actors add a values-based dimension.

Together, these functions create a place that is active across different times of day and for different publics.

Challenges

- The main challenge of this kind of project is complexity. A large hybrid site requires coordination, management, planning, and compliance.

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- There is also a risk that large-scale regeneration becomes disconnected from local residents. A place can be attractive and active, but still raise questions about affordability, accessibility and social inclusion.
- Balance. When a site includes restaurants, shops, events, cultural activities and workspaces, the social or educational mission must remain visible. Otherwise, the project may be perceived mainly as a commercial development.

Lessons for others

1. For other large heritage sites, the lesson is that scale requires structure. Strong vision is necessary, but not enough. Governance, partnerships, professional operation and social purpose must be developed together.
2. This case also reminds us that urban heritage reuse should not only create attractive places. It should create places where different groups can meet and participate.

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J. Additional examples from the research

The cases above do not cover all the initiatives explored during Heritage RE:START. Several other examples also contributed important insights.

In France:

- Le Rucher Portésien showed how a former presbytery could become a coworking and community hub, combining local economic development, remote work, workshops and ecological renovation.
- Les Alouettes in Blagnac illustrated a municipal third-place model focused on urban culture, repair, reuse, youth engagement and shared governance.
- The Église du Gesù and the Chapelle Saint-Jacques showed how religious buildings can be adapted for music, contemporary art and cultural education.
- Le Château d'Eau in Toulouse offered an example of a former water tower transformed into a photography gallery and learning resource.

In Germany:

- Examples such as Schloss Goseck, Schloss Bothmer, Alter Schlachthof Erfurt and other castle or palace initiatives added further lessons on public investment, association-led revitalisation, urban redevelopment, tourism, cultural programming, financing and long-term maintenance.

The purpose of this toolkit is not to rank these initiatives or decide which model is best. Each one offers something different. Some show how to mobilise a community. Some show how to work with public authorities. Some show how to develop a strong theme. Some show how to start small. Others show the importance of professional management and diversified income.

The next section builds on these examples by looking more closely at recurring insights from France and Germany. It identifies common themes, differences and practical lessons that emerged across the two contexts.

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IV. Insights from France and Germany

The Heritage RE:START project was built around cooperation between partners in France and Germany. This comparative dimension was important because it made it possible to look at heritage reuse from different territorial, institutional and cultural perspectives.

Before looking at recurring themes, it is important to avoid oversimplification. There is no single “French approach” and no single “German approach.” The project did not compare two national systems in a scientific or exhaustive way. Instead, it collected examples, testimonies and observations from specific initiatives. The insights presented here should therefore be understood as practical reflections emerging from the project, not as general conclusions about all heritage reuse in France or Germany. Together, these perspectives make the Toolkit richer.

A. Insights from France

1. **Heritage reuse as local social infrastructure** - Many of the French examples explored through the project show heritage reuse as a way to create or strengthen local social infrastructure. In this sense, the building is not only restored for its historical value.

La Minoterie de Gardouch and The Centre Socio-Culturel Nelson Mandela in Luchon are strong cases of this. Another example is Le Rucher Portésien, located in a former presbytery, became a coworking and community hub that responded to changing work habits, local entrepreneurship and the need for shared professional and learning spaces.

2. **The importance of third places and hybrid uses** - A recurring feature in the French examples is the importance of third places and hybrid uses. The term “third place” can cover many realities, but in the project it often refers to spaces that combine several activities: culture, work, food, learning, repair, events, social life and local initiatives. This model is useful because it responds to several needs at once.

Les Halles de la Cartoucherie in Toulouse illustrates this at a large urban scale. La Minoterie de Gardouch shows a more rural version of hybrid reuse. Les Alouettes in Blagnac offers another example, connecting urban culture, youth engagement, repair, reuse and circular economy activities.

The lesson is not that every project should become a third place. Some buildings need a more focused use. However, the French examples show that hybrid programming can help make heritage buildings more accessible and resilient.

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3. **Municipalities as key actors** - In several French cases, municipalities or public authorities played a central role. They may own the building, finance renovation, provide technical support, make premises available, or support programming through local policies.

This can create opportunities. A municipality can protect a building from abandonment and connect the project to wider territorial strategies. However, municipal involvement also creates challenges. Public procedures can be slow. Political priorities may change. Associations may depend on access to premises that they do not control. Users may have limited influence if governance is too top-down. The most promising municipal examples are those where public support is combined with local participation.

4. **Cooperative and community-led dynamics** - Alongside municipal models, the French examples also highlighted cooperative and community-led dynamics.

La Colo du Cagire and La Minoterie de Gardouch show that community engagement can be more than consultation. People can contribute financially, practically, socially and politically. They can help define the identity of the project and not only participate in activities once the place is open. However, they also need structure and coordination.

5. **Cultural reuse of religious and symbolic buildings** - Several French examples also showed how religious or symbolic buildings can be reused for culture and learning.

The Église du Gesù in Toulouse became a space for music, especially organ and classical music. Chapelle Saint-Jacques in Saint-Gaudens became a contemporary art centre. Le Château d'Eau in Toulouse, although not religious, is another symbolic building transformed into a cultural and educational resource focused on photography.

The challenge is to adapt the building respectfully. New uses must be compatible with the site's heritage value, public expectations and technical constraints.

B. Insights from Germany

1. **Long-term preservation as a central concern** - The German examples explored through the project placed strong emphasis on long-term preservation.

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Large historical buildings create long-term responsibilities. They require maintenance, technical knowledge, funding, reserves, legal clarity and personal commitment. Their future cannot depend only on one renovation project or one successful event. They need a model that can support them over time.

The German cases showed clearly that a project may look successful from the outside while still being financially or personally fragile. This is one of the strongest lessons from the German context: heritage reuse must be planned as a long-term responsibility, not only as a project phase.

2. **Ownership, responsibility and personal commitment** - The German interviews also highlighted the role of ownership and personal responsibility. Several examples involved private owners, foundations, associations or individuals carrying a very heavy burden for the preservation of historical buildings.

Owners, founders, and local leaders often bring vision, energy and continuity. But this commitment can also become risky. If too much depends on one person or one family, the project may become vulnerable. Several interviews pointed to burnout, emotional strain and the difficulty of sustaining such responsibility over many years.

3. **The need for professional management** - Another major German insight is the importance of professional management. The interviews with castle and palace actors repeatedly showed that idealism alone is not enough.

Managing a heritage building may involve finance, taxation, funding applications, marketing, public relations, technical maintenance, etc – all of which require skills. Even volunteer-led projects need professional habits.

This insight is useful for all readers: one of the first tasks in a heritage reuse project is not only to assess the building, but to assess the team. *What skills are already present? What skills are missing? Who can help?*

4. **Financial realism and diversified income** - Several recurring ideas appeared in the interviews: external income can be important in the early phase; rental income can provide stability; events may generate revenue but also require management, etc.

The idea of a hybrid financial model is therefore central. A project may combine profitable and non-profit activities, public funding and private income, volunteer support and professional services. Some German examples also pointed to legal structures that separate ownership, commercial operation and non-profit cultural or community activities.

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This can be complex, but it offers a useful lesson: It is about designing a structure that allows different forms of value to coexist.

5. **Bureaucracy, regulation and the need for support** - Bureaucracy appeared as a major challenge in the German materials. Some interviewees stressed that funding systems are not always adapted to private or community-led initiatives. Administrative costs may not be covered, and some ideas are hard to finance.

This is important because many heritage projects fail or become exhausted before they reach implementation. The German examples therefore highlight the need for advisory structures, peer networks and professional support.

6. **Voluntary Engagement and Living Heritage** - The German examples also highlighted the importance of volunteering and living heritage. Places such as Burg Lohra and initiatives like Build, Share & Repair in Erfurt illustrate how people can build a relationship with places through practical involvement.

Voluntary work can support maintenance, repair, cultural programming, community activities and social life. However, it also requires coordination. It should not be treated as free labour without limits. Volunteers need clear tasks, welcoming structures, safety, recognition and realistic expectations.

C. Practical implications for readers

For readers who want to develop a heritage reuse initiative, the Franco-German comparison offers several practical points of reference.

1. **Look beyond your own local habits** - A building in one country may inspire solutions in another, even if the legal or financial systems are different. The exact model may not be transferable, but the underlying idea may be.
2. **Identify what kind of challenge** - Is it a question of community mobilisation, funding, governance, or long-term maintenance? Different examples can help with different challenges.
3. **Do not separate social purpose from operational reality** - A project needs both. It should be useful and meaningful, but also manageable and financially realistic.
4. **Build partnerships early** - Whether the project is public, private, associative, cooperative, or informal, it will need allies. These may include municipalities, residents, technical experts, or other heritage initiatives actors.

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5. **Accept that reuse is a process** - The French and German examples both show that heritage projects grow through phases, experiments, setbacks, adaptations and learning. The goal is not to copy a perfect model, but to build a path that fits the place and the people involved.
6. **Keep the long term in view** - The question is not only how to reopen a building, but how to keep it alive, useful and cared for over time.

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V. Practical Guide

This section translates the lessons of Heritage RE:START into a practical pathway for people who want to develop, support, or strengthen a heritage reuse initiative.

The examples studied through the project show that many initiatives face similar stages: They need to understand the place, define a purpose, involve people, assess constraints, build partnerships, secure resources, test activities, choose a governance model and plan for long-term sustainability.

The guide below presents these stages as a practical sequence. In reality, they will often overlap. The important point is not to follow the steps mechanically. The aim is to use them as a framework for reflection and action.

A. Start from the place

Every heritage reuse initiative begins with a place. The first step is to understand it before deciding what it should become. This means looking at both its material reality and its social meaning.

The material reality includes the building's condition, ownership, utilities, legal status, and maintenance needs. These factors will influence what can be done, how quickly, and at what cost. The social meaning of the place is just as important.

Before imagining a new use, take time to observe and document the place. Walk through it. Look at its access points, rooms, outdoor spaces, visible damages, existing qualities and possible limitations. Gather stories from people who know it. Search for archives, photos, previous uses, ownership history and local narratives.

A heritage reuse project becomes stronger when it does not treat the building as an empty container. The past of the place should not dictate everything, but it should inform the future.

Practical direction

At this early stage, it's important to have a shared understanding of the place.

Useful first actions include:

- ☐ Visiting the site with people who know its history
- ☐ Collecting basic information about ownership and legal status
- ☐ Identifying visible technical issues
- ☐ Mapping existing spaces and possible access points
- ☐ Gathering memories, photos or testimonies from local residents
- ☐ Checking whether the building has protected heritage status

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- ☐ Identifying what parts of the building could possibly be used first
- ☐ Documenting risks that require immediate attention

This first step should help the project team avoid two common mistakes: romanticising the building without understanding its constraints, or reducing it to a technical problem without recognising its meaning.

B. Understand local needs

Understanding local needs does not have to begin with a large research process. It can start with conversations, existing municipal plans, association networks, public events, or simple surveys. What matters is to avoid designing the project only from the point of view of the building owner or project initiator.

Practical direction

At this stage, the project team should identify who lives, works, studies, creates, organises or spends time around the site. It should also identify which groups are often missing from decision-making: young people, older residents, newcomers, informal groups, and the like.

Useful first actions include:

- ☐ Speaking with local residents and associations
- ☐ Identifying existing services and missing spaces
- ☐ Mapping stakeholders
- ☐ Checking municipal, regional, cultural, social or tourism strategies
- ☐ Identifying needs that are recurring, not only individual preferences

C. Define the purpose of the project

This purpose should explain what the initiative is trying to achieve and why the building is the right place for it. It should be simple enough to communicate, but strong enough to guide decisions. This helps avoid the common risk in heritage reuse which is that ideas multiply too quickly.

It should be clear who the project's target group is. A building cannot always serve everyone equally. It may be open to many people, but it still needs clear priorities.

Practical direction

A useful purpose statement can be short. It should explain the building, the need and the intended impact.

Examples:

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"This project aims to transform the former school into a shared socio-cultural centre for local associations, youth activities and intergenerational learning."

Or:

"This project aims to preserve the castle by developing educational, cultural and community uses that support long-term maintenance and local participation."

Useful first actions include:

- ☐ Writing a short mission statement
- ☐ Identifying the main users or beneficiaries
- ☐ Deciding which needs the project will prioritise
- ☐ Checking whether the purpose fits the building's condition and identity
- ☐ Testing and revising the purpose with partners and potential users

D. Build a core group

The core group is the first circle of people who carry the project forward. The composition depends on the project, but the group should combine commitment with useful skills and not just enthusiasm.

Practical direction

The first core group does not need to be large. A small, reliable group is often better than a large group with unclear commitment.

Useful first actions include:

1. Identifying the people already committed to the project
2. Mapping the skills of each member
3. Identifying missing skills
4. Defining roles
5. Agreeing on communication channels
6. Setting realistic expectations about time and availability
7. Writing down important decisions

It can also be useful to distinguish between different circles of involvement:

1. The core group that carries responsibility
2. Active contributors who support specific tasks
3. Occasional volunteers or participants
4. Partners and advisors
5. Wider community members who should be informed

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E. Map stakeholders and build partnerships

A heritage reuse project is part of a wider ecosystem. It will usually need support from actors beyond the core group. Stakeholders may include the municipality, building owners, neighbours, funders, heritage authorities, and the like. Not all stakeholders will be partners. Some may simply need to be informed. Others may need to be consulted.

Practical direction

At this stage, the project team can create a simple stakeholder map. It does not need to be complicated. The aim is to identify who should be contacted, who should be involved, and who may have concerns.

Useful first actions include:

- ☐ Listing all actors connected to the building or territory
- ☐ Identifying who owns, regulates, funds or uses the site
- ☐ Identifying potential partners for activities
- ☐ Identifying neighbours and groups likely to be affected
- ☐ Clarifying roles before announcing partnerships publicly
- ☐ Keeping records of meetings and agreements

F. Assess constraints and opportunities

Before defining a full plan, the project needs to understand what is possible. This means assessing both constraints and opportunities. Constraints are not only problems. They are conditions that shape the project. A building may have protected status, limited access, structural weaknesses, heating problems, unclear ownership, safety requirements, or high renovation costs. These factors must be known early.

Opportunities may include available rooms, outdoor spaces, local interest, existing networks, funding programmes, symbolic value, tourism potential, skilled volunteers, public support, or temporary-use possibilities.

A realistic assessment helps prevent disappointment. It also helps the project choose a first phase that is achievable.

Practical direction

A basic opportunity and constraint assessment should include at least five dimensions:

1. **Physical condition:** What parts of the site can function?

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2. **Legal situation:** Who owns the building? Who can authorise use? Are there leases, restrictions, heritage protections or unresolved rights?
3. **Safety and public access:** What is required before use?
4. **Financial reality:** What are the expected costs throughout?
5. **Social and territorial potential:** Who may use the place? What local needs does it respond to? What support already exists?

Useful first actions include:

- ☐ Requesting a technical visit if needed
- ☐ Clarifying ownership and permission to use the space
- ☐ Identifying urgent safety issues
- ☐ Checking heritage protection requirements
- ☐ Estimating basic running costs
- ☐ Listing spaces that could be activated first
- ☐ Identifying quick wins and major barriers
- ☐ Documenting assumptions that still need verification

This assessment should be updated over time. A project often discovers new constraints as it progresses.

G. Choose a governance model

Governance defines how decisions are made, who is responsible, how money is managed and how accountability is ensured.

The governance model should fit the purpose, the risks and the scale of the project. At the beginning, governance can be simple. However, it should become clearer as soon as the project handles money, signs agreements, welcomes the public, employs people, rents spaces, or applies for funding.

Practical direction

When choosing governance, the project team should think about responsibility, participation and risk.

Useful questions include:

- ☐ Who owns or controls the building?
- ☐ Who manages the money?
- ☐ Who is authorized to sign contracts or grant applications?
- ☐ Who makes decisions about use, programming, and partnerships?
- ☐ How can residents, users, or members participate?
- ☐ What happens in the event of conflicts?
- ☐ What happens if key people step down or leave?

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- ☐ What structure creates credibility with funders and public authorities?
- ☐ What structure protects the social or cultural purpose?

These questions may require legal advice. It is better to seek guidance early than to change structure after problems appear. Governance should be visible and understandable. People are more likely to trust a project when they know who is responsible and how decisions are made.

H. Develop a realistic financial model

Financial planning must begin as early as possible and it should reflect the mission. It should answer how the project will pay for renovation, maintenance, and running costs.

The examples studied through Heritage RE:START strongly suggest the importance of hybrid models. Most projects need several sources of income or support and the right combination depends on the place.

Practical direction

A basic financial plan should include:

1. **Start-up costs:** Studies, legal work, insurance, first equipment, initial repairs, communication, permits, and coordination.
2. **Investment costs:** Renovation, accessibility, energy systems, furniture, safety equipment, technical infrastructure, and major works.
3. **Operating costs:** Utilities, maintenance, rent or loan repayments, staff, cleaning, communication, administration, insurance, and repairs.
4. **Income and support:** Grants, earned income, donations, memberships, rentals, events, services, volunteer work, in-kind support, and partnerships.
5. **Reserves and risk:** Unexpected repairs, delays, lower income than expected, increased energy costs, or funding gaps.

Useful first actions include:

- ☐ Estimating minimum monthly running costs
- ☐ Identifying what costs are fixed and what costs depend on activity level
- ☐ Testing different income scenarios
- ☐ Deciding which activities should remain free or affordable
- ☐ Identifying possible grants or public support
- ☐ Planning reserves, even modest ones

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I. Plan the project in phases

Heritage reuse projects are often too complex to complete all at once, and a phased approach makes it more manageable. Phasing means dividing the project into doable steps.

Each phase reveals what works, who participates, what costs appear, which partners are reliable and what needs adjustment.

Practical direction

Projects are often too complex to implement everything at once. A phased approach makes the process more manageable.

Phasing means dividing the project into steps. Each phase reveals what works, who is involved, the costs incurred, which partners are reliable, and what needs to be adjusted.

A PHASED APPROACH: FOUR STEPS TO LONG-TERM IMPACT

Break the project into steps. Learn, adapt and build on what works.



A phased approach (illustrated by OpenAI)

Not every project will follow these exact phases. The important point is to avoid trying to do everything at once.

Useful first actions include:

- ☐ Defining the smallest meaningful first step

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- ☐ Identifying which spaces can be used safely first
- ☐ Choosing pilot activities that match the project purpose
- ☐ Setting short-term and long-term priorities
- ☐ Connecting each phase to available resources
- ☐ Documenting what is learned after each phase
- ☐ Revising the plan regularly

J. Design activities and uses

Activities should be chosen according to the purpose of the project, the needs of the territory and the capacities of the team.

Activities can have different functions. Some generate income. Some build community. A strong project often combines these functions, but it should remain coherent.

It can be useful to distinguish between three types of activity:

1. **Anchor activities:** These give the place its identity and happen regularly. Examples include a café, coworking space, repair workshop, museum, youth programme, cultural season, or educational offer.
2. **Occasional activities:** These create variety and attract different publics. Examples include concerts, public meetings, festivals, temporary exhibitions, markets, training sessions, open days, or seasonal events.
3. **Support activities:** These help the project survive financially or organisationally. Examples include rentals, private events, accommodation, paid workshops, catering, consulting, or partnerships.

The balance between these activities depends on the mission. A project should avoid letting income-generating activities completely replace its social or cultural purpose. At the same time, it should not ignore the need for income if that income is what allows public activities to continue.

Practical direction

When designing activities, the project team should think about rhythm.

A place that opens only occasionally may struggle to build community. A place that offers too many activities too quickly may exhaust its team. The aim is to find a rhythm that is visible, manageable and meaningful.

Useful first actions include:

- ☐ Identifying one or two anchor activities
- ☐ Testing and matching small activities before launching a full programme
- ☐ Deciding which activities are free, low-cost or paid

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- ☐ Evaluating attendance and feedback
- ☐ Stopping activities that do not serve the purpose or drain too much energy

K. Involve the community

Community involvement should be planned from the beginning and not only after decisions have been made. After all, community involvement should be concrete and it also requires care.

Practical direction

Useful ways to involve people include:

1. Organising open days or guided visits
2. Collecting memories and stories about the building
3. Offering practical volunteer days
4. Hosting small events before full opening
5. Creating membership or supporter options
6. Thanking contributors visibly

L. Communicate clearly and consistently

A heritage reuse initiative should communicate from the early stages. People need to know what is happening, who is involved, what the project aims to do and how they can take part. This strengthens mobilization.

Communication should be honest. It is useful to share progress, but also to explain delays, constraints and uncertainties. Heritage reuse is often slow and complex. If the process is communicated well, people may better understand why it takes time.

Communication does not need to be expensive. It can use local press, posters, newsletters, social media, public meetings, open days, photos, short videos, local events, municipal channels, partner networks, or word of mouth. What matters is regularity and clarity.

Practical direction

A basic communication strategy should define:

- Who the project needs to reach
- What message should be shared
- Which channels are realistic
- Who is responsible for communication
- How often updates will be shared
- How people can ask questions or get involved
- What consent is needed for photos, quotes or personal stories

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Useful first actions include:

- ☐ Creating a short project description
- ☐ Preparing a simple visual identity or using the project logo
- ☐ Documenting activities with photos and notes
- ☐ Announcing public opportunities early
- ☐ Sharing behind-the-scenes progress
- ☐ Explaining constraints in accessible language

M. Document the process

Documentation is often underestimated, but it is essential.

A heritage reuse project should keep records of decisions, activities, participants, partnerships, funding, communication, permissions, technical information and lessons learned. This is useful for reporting, evaluation, communication, future funding and internal memory.

Documentation also helps when people leave the project. If all knowledge remains in the head of one person, the initiative becomes fragile. Written records, shared folders, meeting notes, budgets, contact lists and photo archives help create continuity.

For projects supported by public or European funding, documentation is also a responsibility. It shows that activities happened, that participants were involved, that communication took place and that public resources were used seriously.

Practical direction

Useful documents to keep include:

- Meeting notes
- Agreements with partners or owners
- Technical assessments
- Budgets and invoices
- Funding applications and reports
- Participant lists when relevant
- Communication materials
- Testimonies or feedback
- Pictures of activities and renovation progress
- Permissions and consent forms

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N. Plan for maintenance and long-term care

Maintenance should be part of the project plan from the beginning. This includes regular repairs, cleaning, safety checks, equipment, utilities, and even future governance and financial reserves.

Practical direction

A basic maintenance and long-term care plan should include:

- ☐ A list of recurring building checks
- ☐ A schedule for cleaning and minor repairs
- ☐ Responsibilities and rules
- ☐ An annual budget for maintenance
- ☐ A reserve fund, even if small
- ☐ Documentation of technical systems
- ☐ Contact details for craftspeople and experts
- ☐ Succession planning for key roles

O. Evaluate and adapt

A heritage reuse project should regularly evaluate what it is doing to help learning and adaptation. Evaluation should combine numbers and stories. Attendance figures, income, membership, volunteer hours and event numbers are useful. But testimonies, observations, conflicts, informal feedback and visible changes in local life are also important.

Useful evaluation can look at several dimensions:

- How many people use the place
- Who is reached and who is missing
- Which activities work well
- Whether the building is being cared for properly
- Whether the financial model is realistic
- Whether volunteers and staff are overloaded
- Whether partners remain engaged
- Whether the project still serves its purpose
- Whether the community understands and supports it

Practical direction

Useful first actions include:

- ☐ Collecting feedback after activities
- ☐ Holding regular reflection meetings

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- ☐ Reviewing and tracking finances
- ☐ Adjusting the programme instead of adding more activities automatically
- ☐ Reviewing the mission once a year

P. A possible pathway for action

The steps above can be summarised as a pathway checklist. Each project will adapt it, but it can help structure early planning.

- ☐ Step 1: Understand the place
- ☐ Step 2: Understand the territory
- ☐ Step 3: Define the purpose
- ☐ Step 4: Build the core group
- ☐ Step 5: Map stakeholders and partners
- ☐ Step 6: Assess constraints and opportunities
- ☐ Step 7: Choose a governance model
- ☐ Step 8: Build a financial model
- ☐ Step 9: Start with phases
- ☐ Step 10: Activate the place
- ☐ Step 11: Communicate and document
- ☐ Step 12: Plan for long-term care

It is worth remembering that this pathway is not linear. Some steps will need to be repeated. The value of the pathway is that it helps the project remain aware of the main dimensions that need attention.

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VI. Practical Steps for Heritage Reuse

The previous sections presented examples, lessons and insights from France and Germany. This section turns those reflections into a simple practical framework for readers who want to start, support, or strengthen a heritage reuse initiative.

It is not a technical manual because every building has its own complexities. Professional advice may be needed for certain aspects such as architecture, safety, accessibility, finance, legal questions, heritage protection, etc.

However, the initiatives explored through Heritage RE:START show that many projects begin with similar questions. The following steps are designed as a practical orientation. They can be used by anyone interested in giving a new purpose to a historical or underused place.

A. Read the place

A heritage reuse project should begin with the place itself. A careful reading of the place should include both practical and human dimensions. What parts of the building are usable? What needs urgent attention? What is protected? What stories are attached to it? What should be preserved, and what could change?

→ Use [Annex 1: Place Scan](#)

B. Identify local needs

A needs assessment does not have to be complex, it can start with conversations. The goal is not to make the building serve everyone but rather to identify a few strong needs that fit the place and can guide the future use.

→ Use [Annex 2: Local Needs Map](#)

C. Map the people and partners

Mapping stakeholders helps the project understand its ecosystem. Who owns the building? Who has authority over it? Who could use it? Who might support it? Who might be affected by it? Who is missing from the conversation?

→ Use [Annex 3: Stakeholder Map](#)

D. Clarify the project model

A heritage reuse project needs a model that connects purpose, governance, activities and finance, because this is often where projects become fragile. The model does not need to be perfect from the beginning, but it should be discussed early.

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➔ Use [Annex 4: SWOT Analysis](#) and [Annex 5: Financial Model](#)

E. Start small and test

Starting small is especially useful for projects with limited resources. A first small activity can create momentum and help the team make better decisions for the next phase. It can also enable adaptation and learning before making major financial investments.

➔ Use [Annex 6: Action Plan](#)

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VII. Closing Reflections: Heritage as a Living Resource

Heritage reuse begins with places that already exist, shaped by history, memory, former uses and local identity.

One of the main lessons of this toolkit is that there is no single path. This diversity matters because it reminds us that heritage reuse cannot be copied from one context to another without adaptation. What can be transferred is not a fixed model, but a way of thinking.

The Franco-German dimension of Heritage RE:START showed that heritage reuse is both an opportunity and a responsibility. It is an opportunity because old and underused buildings can become active spaces again that can support learning and reconnection. It is also a responsibility because these places need continuous care.. For this reason, heritage reuse should not be romanticised. It is demanding work, and it requires patience as well as vision.

For readers who are considering a heritage reuse project, the message of this toolkit is both encouraging and realistic. It is possible to begin before everything is perfect, as long as the first steps are connected to a wider purpose. But it is also important to look ahead. The strongest projects are not only those that manage to open a building but the ones that think about how to keep it alive.

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VIII. Annexes

The following worksheets are designed to support the process of analysing and implementing heritage reuse initiatives. They are intentionally simple, can be adapted to fit different needs and do not need to be completed perfectly.

The six worksheets are:

- **ANNEX 1: Place Scan**
- **ANNEX 2: Local Needs Map**
- **ANNEX 3: Stakeholder Map**
- **ANNEX 4: SWOT Analysis**
- **ANNEX 5: Financial Model**
- **ANNEX 6: Action Plan**

Using these tools can help a project move from an idea to clearer next steps.

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A. Place Scan

Purpose: Understand the building / site before deciding what it should become.

Question	Answer / Notes
What is the name and location of the building or site?	
Who currently owns it?	
Who currently uses it, if anyone?	
What was its former use?	
Why is it underused, empty, or at risk?	
Is it protected as heritage?	
What spaces are usable now?	
What parts are unsafe, fragile, or uncertain?	
What visible issues need checking?	
What documents, plans, photos, or studies already exist?	
What memories or stories are attached to the place?	
What should be preserved in its identity?	
What could change without damaging its meaning?	

First Conclusions:

Main potential of the place:

Main constraints:

Information still missing:

Possible first use or first space to activate:

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B. Local Needs Map

Purpose: Connect the building with real needs in the territory.

Local need or gap	Who is affected?	Could the place respond to it? How?
Culture and events		
Learning / training		
Youth activities		
Social support / inclusion		
Community meeting space		
Local work / entrepreneurship		
Food / agriculture		
Tourism / visitors		
Other:		

Existing local resources

Existing actors / resources	What do they already do?	Could they connect with the project?
Associations / NGOs		
Schools / training centres		
Social organisations		
Local businesses		
Public facilities		
Informal groups		
Skilled residents / volunteers		
Other:		

Priority needs: Choose 3 priority needs the project could realistically address.

1.
2.
3.

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C. Stakeholder Map

Purpose: Identify stakeholders and decide how they should be involved.

Stakeholder	Connection to the project	Possible Role	Follow-up action
Building owner			
Public authority			
Residents / Users			
Associations / NGOs			
Local businesses			
Funders			
Technical experts			
Volunteers			
Other:			

Level of involvement

Group	Who belongs here?
Core group: carries the project forward	
Partners: contribute resources, skills, activities...	
People to consult: affected by the project or important for local trust	
People to inform: should receive updates but are not directly involved.	

Possible concerns

Concern	Who might have this concern?	How can it be addressed?
Noise		
Safety		
Cost		
Loss of heritage value		
Privatisation or exclusion		
Lack of transparency		
Other:		

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D. SWOT Analysis

Purpose: Identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

Strengths What advantages do we already have?	Weaknesses What internal limits do we need to address?
Opportunities What external possibilities could help us?	Threats What external risks could affect us?

Strategic links: Use the SWOT table to identify useful connections.

Link	Notes
Which strength can help us use an opportunity ?	
Which strength can help us reduce a threat ?	
Which weakness could block an opportunity ?	
Which weakness could make a threat worse?	

From analysis to action: Select the most important points to act on.

One strength to build on:
One weakness to reduce:
One opportunity to explore:
One threat to prepare for:

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E. Financial Model

Purpose: Analyse the project's costs, income and sustainability.

Cost category	Estimated amount	One-time / recurring	Notes
Legal / admin costs			
Technical studies			
Urgent repairs			
Renovation works			
Equipment			
Insurance			
Utilities			
Communication			
Staff / coordination			
Activities or programming			
Cleaning / maintenance			
Reserve for unexpected costs			

Income source	Estimated amount	Reliable / uncertain	Notes
Grants			
Membership fees			
Donations / crowdfunding			
Rentals			
Events			
Café / catering			
Paid activities / workshops			
Accommodation			

Minimum monthly costs to keep the project running:
Fixed costs, even without activities:
Activities that could bring income:
Important activities that need funding:
Main financial risk:
Next financial decision to make:

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F. Action Plan

Purpose: Turn reflection into clear next steps.

How to use: Choose a few realistic actions, set responsibility and deadlines.

Objective / area	Action	Responsible person	Deadline	Done
				☐
				☐
				☐
				☐
				☐
				☐
				☐
				☐
				☐

Immediate next steps

In the next two weeks, we will:

1.
2.
3.

In the next three months, we will:

1.
2.
3.

Main decision to make:

Main information still missing:

Person or organisation to contact: