

Vacant Building Reuse - A Practical Guide

Reactivating vacant buildings can seem complex: questions about financing, permits, team organisation or long-term operation often arise early in the process. This guide provides a structured overview based on real experiences from successful projects.

It is aimed at municipalities, initiatives, property owners and committed individuals, especially in rural areas, and is designed to help turn an initial idea into a viable project.



1. Why reuse a vacant building?

Vacant buildings are visible in many communities, often right in the centre. They can weaken the townscape, slow down economic activity and lead to the loss of important meeting places. At the same time, they offer the opportunity to develop new functions that better match current needs.

Reactivating existing buildings can save resources, strengthen local identity and create new impulses for community and economy. Especially in rural areas, many successful projects emerge where concrete needs are identified, such as missing workspaces, gastronomy or places for social interaction and culture.

A good first step is therefore to observe the local situation carefully and start conversations.

Checklist:

- Identify missing services or functions in the area
- Talk to residents and local businesses
- Map vacant buildings
- Assess potential local impact

TIPS

- ✓ Start with real needs
- ✓ Make the benefits for the community visible
- ✗ Plan uses without demand
- ✗ Choose buildings based only on emotional reasons

- Relevant Links:**
- [Austrian platform for rural development](#)
 - [Sustainable Austria & sustainable development](#)

Vacant
Building =
Potential

2. From idea to vision

At the beginning, there is often a vague idea, a vacant building, a desire for change or a specific need. To turn this into a project, a shared understanding of the direction is required.

A vision helps to define goals and set priorities. It describes not only the intended use but also the value for the community. Workshops, discussions with potential users or a simple brainstorming can help develop a realistic picture.

At the same time, it is important to realistically assess available resources: time, motivation, skills and financial capacity. A strong vision combines enthusiasm with realism.

Checklist:

- Define project goals
- Identify target groups (optional)
- Collect ideas for use
- Assess resources realistically

TIPS

- ✓ Involve users early
- ✓ Put the vision into writing
- ✗ Fix the concept too early
- ✗ Overstimulate available capacity



Relevant Links:

- [Participation](#)
- [Innovative and integrated strategies for rural areas](#)
- [Regional consultancy](#)



3. Find & understand the building

Not every vacant building is suitable for every use. Location, size, condition and ownership play a crucial role. Particularly in town centres, it is worth looking beyond obvious options, such as courtyards or former commercial spaces.

Before taking concrete steps, key questions should be clarified: Who owns the building? Is rental, lease or purchase possible? What renovation work is required? Are there restrictions due to heritage protection or zoning?

An initial professional assessment can help avoid surprises and provide a sense of potential costs.

Checklist:

- Contact owners
- Check building condition
- Clarify zoning & heritage protection
- Estimate renovation effort

TIPS

- ✓ Seek professional advice
- ✓ Compare alternatives
- ✗ Choose a building only because it is available
- ✗ Ignore hidden costs



Relevant Links:

- [Various information about construction \(AT\)](#)
- [Construction law & regulations by AT federal state](#)
- [Heritage protection \(AT\)](#)
- [Spatial/regional planning \(AT\)](#)



4. Build the team & governance structure

Hardly any reuse project is implemented alone. Successful initiatives are usually led by a committed core team with diverse skills, such as organisation, communication, craftsmanship, or business expertise.

Choosing the right organisational form is equally important. Associations, cooperatives or private ownership models each offer different opportunities and responsibilities. In some cases, hybrid structures emerge that combine economic and non-profit goals.

Clear roles and transparent decision-making processes make collaboration easier and help avoid conflicts.

Checklist:

- Define the core team
- Make competencies visible
- Assign roles
- Choose a legal structure & gather information

TIPS

- ✓ Combine different skills
- ✓ Establish clear decision processes

- ✗ Make the project dependent on one person
- ✗ Leave responsibilities unclear

Relevant Links:

- [Legal structures \(AT\)](#)
- [Founding of an association \(AT\)](#)
- [Legal entities \(AT\)](#)
- [Overview legal entities \(AT\)](#)



Teamwork!

5. Develop the use concept

A functioning use concept is based on real needs and must also be economically viable. Many projects rely on a mix of uses to address different target groups and ensure continuous activity.

It is important to consider the flexible use of spaces. A room used for events today may become a workspace or exhibition space tomorrow. Cooperation with local businesses, associations or initiatives can further strengthen the project.

Frequency is also key here: Which activities ensure that people return regularly?

Inspiration: check out **Vacant Buildings - Prime Examples**

Checklist:

- Define main & secondary uses
- Identify frequency drivers
- Plan flexible spatial solutions
- Identify potential partners

TIPS

- ✓ Design adaptable spaces
- ✓ Involve local stakeholders

- ✗ Focus only on single-use concepts
- ✗ Ignore the operational concept

Relevant Links:

- [Additional inspiration for use concepts](#)
- [Co-Working as an example](#)



6. Financing & economic planning

Without solid financial planning, even good ideas remain risky. In addition to investment costs for renovation or conversion, ongoing costs such as energy, maintenance or staffing must be considered early.

In rural areas, various funding programs are available, such as LEADER projects, rural development programs or regional funding schemes. Membership fees, events or rental income can also be important components.

Self-construction can reduce costs but requires time, organisation and often professional support. A clear financial plan creates transparency and builds trust among partners and funding bodies.

Checklist:

- Calculate investment costs
- Define running costs
- Plan income sources
- Explore funding opportunities

TIPS

- ✓ Plan financial reserves
- ✓ Combine multiple funding sources
- ✗ Rely solely on funding
- ✗ Underestimate maintenance costs

Relevant Links:

- [LEADER-Forum](#)
- [LEADER contacts & information by AT federal state](#)
- [GAP-Strategic Plan 2023-2027, 73-10 Orts- und Stadtkernförderung & 77-04 Reaktivierung des Leerstands](#)
- [KPC "Umfassende Gebäudesanierung"](#)
- [KPC "Flächenrecycling"](#)
- [Brachflächen-Dialog - Funding \(by AT federal state\)](#)
- [Various Funding \(Sustainability\)](#)
- [OeHT Funding \(Projects related to tourism & recreation\)](#)



7. Legal & administrative framework

Depending on the intended use, different permits are required. Building regulations, operating permits or heritage protection requirements can affect timelines. Insurance and agreements with users should also be clarified early.

Many initiatives report that close coordination with municipalities and authorities significantly simplifies the process. Transparency and patience are key in this phase.

Checklist:

- Clarify lease or purchase agreements
- Check required permits
- Organise insurance
- Define user agreements

TIPS

- ✓ Communicate early with authorities
- ✓ Allow time buffers
- ✗ Start without legal clarity
- ✗ Ignore safety requirements

Relevant Links:

- [Regulations for operating facilities \(AT\)](#)
- [Permit for operating facilities \(AT\)](#)
- [Trade law \(AT\)](#)
- [Trade regulation act \(AT\)](#)
- [Accessibility \(AT\)](#)
- [Fire safety \(AT\)](#)
- [Environment and climate \(e.g. energy efficiency\)](#)



8. Planning, renovation & implementation

Implementation is often carried out step by step. Phasing allows early use of parts of the building and provides valuable learning opportunities. At the same time, the limits of self-construction should be realistically assessed.

Good coordination between planners, craftspeople, and the project team helps keep costs under control and timelines realistic.

TIPS

- ✓ Start with core areas
- ✓ Involve local craftspeople
- ✗ Overscale the project
- ✗ Implement changes without coordination



Relevant Links:

- [OIB building standards guidelines](#)
- [Comprehensive building renovation](#)
- [Businesses in the energy transition](#)

Checklist:

- Define construction phases
- Decide on self-construction vs. contractors
- Monitor budget
- Communicate progress

**Start small,
grow step by step**



9. Starting operation & activation

Launching a project is more than completing construction. Events, open days or a soft opening can create visibility and attract users.

Local networks play a key role. Personal recommendations and cooperation with associations or regional media often work better than large-scale marketing campaigns.

TIPS

- ✓ Use personal networks
- ✓ Actively involve the community
- ✗ Expect immediate full occupancy
- ✗ Neglect communication



Relevant Links:

- [Online-Marketing & Social Media](#)
- [Using social media effectively](#)
- [Marketing measures](#)

Checklist:

- Plan opening formats
- Communicate offerings
- Build partnerships
- Collect feedback

**Activate your
community!**



10. Long-term operation & sustainability

After opening, the stabilisation phase begins. Income must be secured, volunteer work coordinated, and offers must be continuously adapted. Projects evolve. New ideas emerge, and target groups may change.

Regular reflection helps identify challenges early and seize opportunities. Successful reuse projects remain flexible and closely connected to their surroundings.

TIPS

- ✓ Stay flexible
- ✓ Make successes visible
- ✗ Assume stability automatically
- ✗ Ignore team overload

Relevant Links: • [Information on volunteering](#)

Checklist:

- Monitor finances regularly
- Organize volunteer structures
- Evaluate a use mix
- Plan future investments



Get inspired by real examples:



DORF-PLATZ

St. Andrä-Wördern

<https://dorfplatz-staw.net/>



**du
ado**

<https://www.duado.eu/>



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