Australian Institute of Architects

Parliament of Victoria
Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into the redevelopment of Melbourne's public housing towers

28th of August 2025

The Victorian Chapter President, Stephanie Bullock FRAIA, referenced Scandinavian adaptive reuse housing projects in her evidence to the Inquiry into the Redevelopment of Melbourne's Public Housing Towers, after which the Committee requested that the Australian Institute of Architects provide further information on these examples, forming the basis of this document.

Scandinavian adaptive reuse housing is widely regarded within the Australian architectural profession as among the best in the world. It exemplifies how design excellence, sustainable practice, and policy alignment can be brought together to transform obsolete buildings into thriving new housing communities. Rather than treating reuse as an afterthought, Scandinavia has elevated it into a deliberate housing delivery model, one that responds to population growth and housing affordability while setting global benchmarks for environmental performance and social value.

This typology is distinguished by its ability to unlock the latent potential of existing building stock, whether mid-century office blocks, industrial facilities, or disused infrastructure, by reconfiguring them into diverse residential typologies that combine liveability with sustainability. Structural frames and envelopes are often retained to reduce embodied carbon, while new facades, terraces, and communal facilities add architectural quality and social life. Projects prioritise resident experience and neighbourhood integration, embedding shared amenities, public spaces, and active ground-floor uses to ensure adaptive reuse contributes positively to the urban fabric.

What sets Scandinavian examples apart is not only the design outcomes but also the systemic framework that enables them. Supportive planning policies, flexible building codes, and strong collaboration between government, developers, and architects reduce barriers and encourage innovation. Crucially, Scandinavian projects are celebrated for their ability to balance practical realities, embracing financial and logistical constraints of construction, while still achieving the highest sustainable credentials. This pragmatic yet visionary approach makes adaptive reuse a source of national pride, showing that environmental responsibility and design ambition can be reconciled without compromise.

Equally important is the cultural ethos underpinning this work. Reuse is understood not only as a technical solution but as an ethical imperative, minimising waste, lowering carbon emissions, and preserving cultural identity. To achieve carbon targets, demolition must always be treated as the last resort. Adaptive reuse should be the first priority, followed by careful deconstruction and cataloguing of materials for future use where reuse is not feasible. This hierarchy reinforces a long-term vision of cities as evolving systems rather than disposable assets.

For Australian architects, these projects serve as an aspirational reference point. They show how reuse can deliver housing that is economically viable, environmentally responsible, and socially enriching, while broadening the role of architects as custodians of the built environment. Scandinavian adaptive reuse housing demonstrates that density, sustainability, and community can co-exist harmoniously, an invaluable lesson as Australia faces its own housing and climate challenges.

No.4

Architect: Hermansson Hiller Lundberg

This project exemplifies adaptive reuse through Hermansson Hiller Lundberg's conversion of a 1990s office building—originally housing Apoteket and Telia—into the residential development known as No. 4 in Nacka, about 5 km from Stockholm's city centre. Retaining the architectural integrity of the original facades, the architects introduced eleven new staircases to navigate the comb-shaped layout and unlock eight floors of previously a single use space. The complex now accommodates approximately 200 apartments across 69 different typologies, ranging from compact units to large units with generously scaled terraces—one typology spans 188 m2 with a 275 m2 terrace, while another is just 35 m2 with an 11 m2 terrace.
Key to the success of the conversion was the careful calibration between facade and internal layout. Rather than allowing a tidy exterior to conceal chaotic interiors—or vice versa—the design embodies harmony, allowing the envelope and the floor plans to support each other seamlessly. This "light-touch" approach demanded intensive coordination between architectural intent and existing structures. Beyond the building itself, No. 4 forms part of a larger urban strategy in Nacka, where Stockholm aims to add new homes and workplaces alongside expanding its metro infrastructure to meet fast-growing population demands—expected to reach a 11 percent increase by 2020. The project was recognised with a nomination for Sweden's ROT Award, which celebrates outstanding architectural conversions.

Location
Nacka, Sweden

Typology
Residential

Year Completed
2018

Number of Apartments
200

Former Use
Office Building

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HOAS Hima

Architect: Architects Kirsi Korhonen & Mika Penttinen

In Helsinki's capital region, over one million square metres, equivalent to 50 residential blocks, of office space remain vacant, even as housing demand rises. The article explores adaptive reuse of these underutilised buildings, highlighting both potential and challenges. A notable case is the 1961 Alppila Industry House, designed with flexibility in mind and now serving varied tenants. Though not yet converted, it illustrates how a robust frame supports evolving uses. Retaining a structure and altering its layout generates only half the carbon emissions of demolition and rebuilding.
In Töölö, a 1979 office wing is being transformed into apartments by developer Newil&Bau. Emphasising character, location, and narrative, the project reinvents the building without erasing its spirit. Design strategies, such as repurposed stairwells, slim UHPC balconies, and double-aspect apartments with central service zones, preserve the frame while ensuring light, air, and functionality. Architect Mika Penttinen stresses that successful conversions require adequate floor-to-ceiling heights, workable frame depths, and solid technical conditions.
In Finland, converted apartments must meet the same regulations as new builds, making each project highly complex and reliant on inventive solutions. These examples show that while adaptive reuse is demanding, it delivers substantial environmental, cultural, and architectural value, turning empty offices into sustainable, meaningful homes.

Location
Helsinki, Finland

Typology
Residential

Year Completed
2024

Number of Apartments
100

Former Use
Office Buildings

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Engvej 155-169

Architect: AI Architects & Engineers

Located near Femøren metro station and Amager Strandpark, the Engvej 155–169 project is a compelling example of adaptive reuse in Copenhagen's residential landscape. Once four identical three-storey office blocks from the 1950s, the complex has been transformed into a vibrant mixed-use neighbourhood featuring 653 student and youth housing units, along with communal amenities such as a café, supermarket, fitness centre, and daycare facility.
The redevelopment retained the original concrete shells while adding a lightweight extra storey. The facades were reconstructed with timber infill and generous windows, and rooftop terraces were introduced to enhance daylight and create new communal spaces. A striking feature of the project is the panoramic "gold bar" bridge, clad in a shimmering finish and connecting the four blocks. Originally conceived as part of a hotel concept, it was reconfigured for residential use when plans shifted during the pandemic. Covering 23,200 m², the project blends pragmatic reuse with new architectural layers, offering shared spaces and a strong community focus.
By transforming mid-century office buildings into high-quality housing, the development demonstrates how adaptive reuse can support sustainability, urban liveability, and resource-conscious growth in a fast-changing city.

Location
Copenhagen, Denmark

Typology
Student accommodation

Year Completed
2022

Number of Apartments
653

Former Use
Office Buildings

Australian Institute of Architects

Kista Square Garden

Architect: COBE and Yellon

Situated in Kista's tech hub near its mall and transit links, Kista Square Garden has earned the title of Stockholm's "hottest" building. The project transforms the former Ericsson office, originally built in 1985, into nearly 900 mixed-use rental and owner-occupied apartments across four stages, with around 200 units expected for initial occupancy in 2026 and completion by 2027. The redevelopment reuses and refurbishes the existing structure, adding up to three new floors and revitalising around 70,000 m² of building area. The adaptive approach focuses on sustainable renovation, retaining elements of the original facade, and minimizing waste from demolition. It is among Sweden's earliest projects to pursue Nordic "Svanen (Swan)" Ecolabel certification for renovation projects.
Designed to foster urban vitality, the complex will blend residential living with vibrant ground-floor public life. Plans include a large, lush courtyard, shared rooftop terrace, cafes, shops, and community spaces, creating an integrated neighbourhood rather than a standalone housing block. Kista Square Garden stands as a leading example of how adaptive reuse can catalyse sustainable urban transformation by preserving building heritage, rapidly expanding housing supply, and energising public space in a dense suburban centre.

Location
Stockholm, Sweden

Typology
Residential and Commercial

Year Completed
In development

Number of Apartments
~ 1,000 Residential
~ 10,000m2 Commercial

Former Use
Office Buildings