



Habitat
for Humanity®

**Empty Spaces
to Homes**

Policy Paper

**Unlocking vacant buildings for
affordable housing**

**Towards a European framework for vacancy
mapping and data collection**

Habitat for Humanity International, Europe and the Middle East
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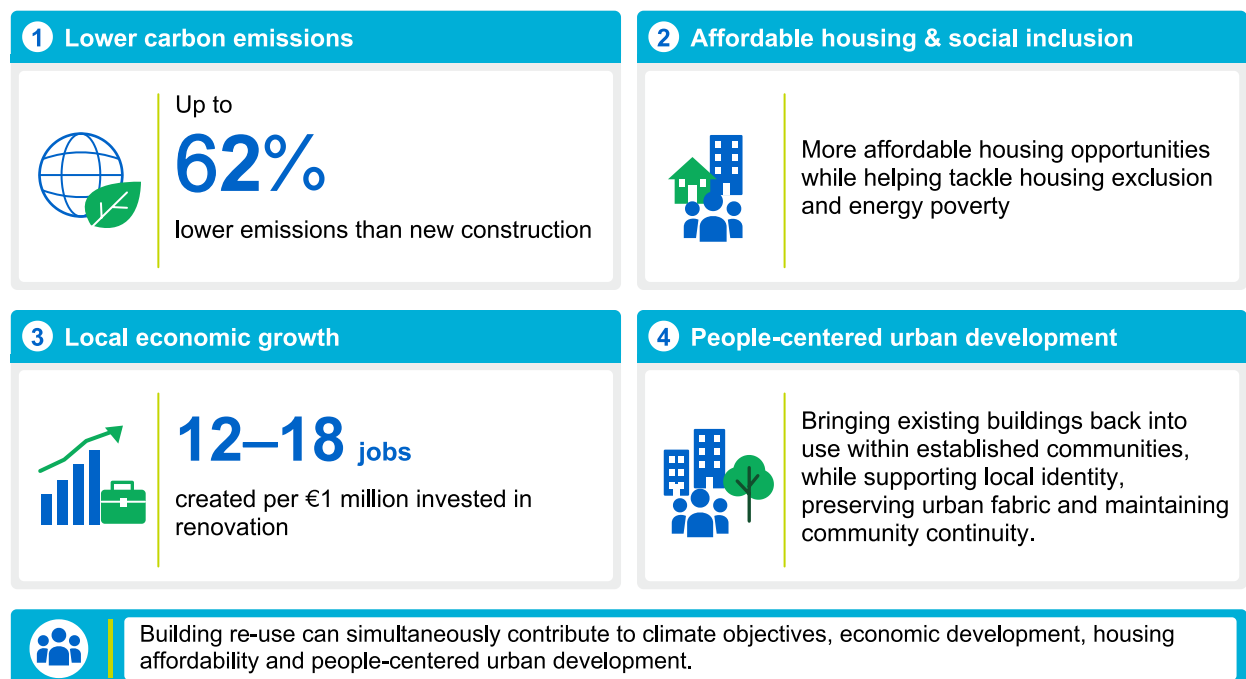
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Introduction

While the European Union and several of its Member States recognize the potential of re-using vacant and underused buildings, progress in identifying suitable assets and bringing them back into use as affordable housing remains limited. Across European cities, significant untapped potential exists in vacant homes, underused public buildings, and increasingly obsolete office and commercial spaces. Here, the re-use of vacant stock, whether through renovation, conversion or the mobilisation of vacant housing units, offers significant advantages across four key dimensions: **reducing carbon emissions, stimulating local economies, expanding access to affordable housing, and supporting people-centred urban development by bringing existing assets back into use within established communities.**

The four dimensions of building reuse



The European Affordable Housing Plan has created new political momentum, however, practical challenges remain with the precise identification of suitable buildings, assessing re-use potential, and scaling successful contextually sensitive approaches. Consequently, this paper addresses this challenge by presenting strategies for defining and mapping vacant buildings and housing units as a first step towards systemic re-use.

The framework can serve at EU-level as well as at national and municipal levels. It also supports the implementation of key European Union priorities, including the European Affordable Housing Plan, the European Green Deal, the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (EPBD), the New European Bauhaus, and wider efforts to increase the supply of affordable and sustainable housing through the re-use of existing stock. The framework is developed by Habitat for Humanity (a global non-profit working towards a world where everyone has a decent place to live) and informed through its network experience, based on the development of tools, their ongoing verification, and Habitat for Humanity's involvement in the topic of identification and re-use of

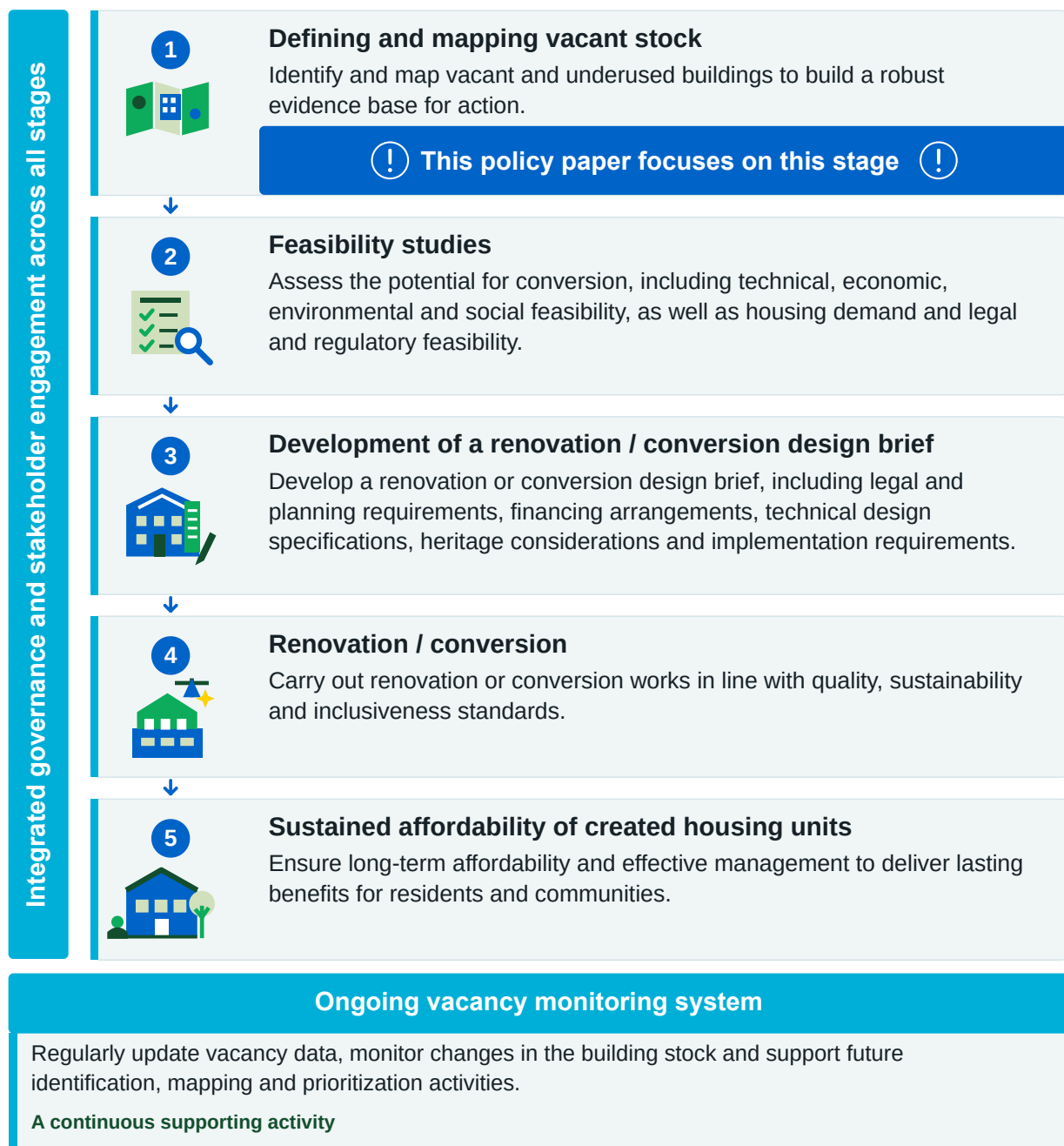
vacant buildings and housing units, including renovation, conversion and mobilization initiatives.

The framework should be understood as a **practical starting point for discussion and further refinement in relation to how vacant buildings and housing units are defined, identified and mapped, rather than a prescriptive model**. It is intended to support policymakers and practitioners in exploring approaches to vacancy identification and mobilization, while encouraging the exchange of experience, lessons learned and innovative solutions across different contexts.

The subsequent stages of project development and implementation are not addressed in this paper.

Renovations / conversions pathways

A step-by-step process from identifying vacant buildings to delivering long-term affordable housing outcomes.



1. Identification of the problem

Vacancy as a missed opportunity

The term “*vacant and underused stock*” encompasses empty housing units within otherwise occupied residential buildings, vacant residential properties, unused public and civic buildings, as well as increasingly obsolete office, commercial and industrial premises. It can range from short-term frictional vacancy to long-term structural vacancy. Each of the types requires different legal, financial and technical approaches to affordable housing reuse through renovation and conversion.

Vacancy can take many forms



Across the European Union, an estimated 30 million dwellings are vacant, while housing affordability has become one of the most pressing social challenges facing the Member States. Millions of households spend 40% or more of their income on housing costs. As identified by Habitat for Humanity, affordable housing reuse through the renovation of vacant residential buildings, the conversion of vacant non-residential buildings and the mobilization of vacant housing units represents a largely untapped opportunity to expand affordable housing supply while substantially reducing carbon emissions compared to new construction.

While the existence of significant vacant and underused building stock across Europe is widely acknowledged, its scale, location and characteristics remain insufficiently identified due to fragmented definitions, inconsistent data collection and limited monitoring systems. As a result, public authorities often lack the evidence needed to identify suitable assets and their mobilization for affordable housing. The challenge is therefore not only to bring vacant buildings back into use, but also to establish systematic approaches for identifying, mapping and prioritizing opportunities for reuse. To better understand why the potential of vacant buildings remains largely untapped, the key barriers to their mobilization for affordable housing are outlined below.

Key barriers to mobilizing vacant buildings for affordable housing



Data & evidence

Fragmented vacancy data

Vacancy information is dispersed across municipal registers, cadastral records, utility data and inspection systems, often using incompatible definitions and methodologies.

Geographical mismatch between vacancy and housing demand

The distribution of vacant buildings does not always correspond to areas of highest housing need. Without systematic mapping, public authorities often lack the evidence needed to identify viable opportunities for affordable housing.



Governance & regionation

Weak legal & technical frameworks

Conversion pathways remain complex, lengthy and poorly aligned with adaptive reuse. Regulatory uncertainty and administrative burdens deter public and private actors from initiating projects.

Unclear or contexted ownership

Ownership is often disputed, fragmented among multiple co-owners or legally unclear. As a result, ownership uncertainty remains one of the principal barriers preventing otherwise viable projects from moving forward.

Poor stakeholder coordination

Bringing vacant buildings back into use requires cooperation among public authorities, private owners, investors, housing providers, technical experts and local communities. Weak coordination often leads to delays and implementation gaps.



Delivery & investment

Financial viability gap

Renovation and conversion projects may cost more per housing unit than new construction, particularly where structural upgrades, energy-efficiency improvements or changes of use are required.

Without addressing these barriers, the potential of vacant and underused buildings to contribute to affordable housing supply will remain largely untapped.

Addressing these barriers requires more than individual building assessments or isolated pilot projects. Current approaches often rely on resource-intensive building-by-building evaluations, resulting in lengthy processes, high uncertainty and limited scalability. A more systematic framework is needed to address the complexity of vacant building identification and mobilization. This framework should combine vacancy mapping with building typologies, renovation and conversion pathways, and housing unit mobilization pathways. Together, these elements can support more informed decision-making and improve understanding of potential risks, costs and affordable housing outcomes.

This paper presents such a framework, intended as a basis for discussion and further refinement. It is designed to be adaptable to different national contexts and to illustrate how vacancy identification, mapping and prioritization systems can be approached in a more structured manner across the European Union and beyond.

2. Defining the problem

Three types of vacant housing

To successfully identify, map and assess vacant stock, a differentiation of types of vacancy is essential. Legal, technical and financial requirements for re-use vary significantly across building types. Habitat for Humanity identifies three different types of vacancy, each requiring distinct approaches and intervention pathways: **vacant non-residential buildings**, **vacant residential buildings** and **vacant housing units**.

Clearly defining these vacancy types is a prerequisite for their systematic identification, mapping and classification to effectively mobilise vacant stock for affordable housing. Authorities should therefore establish clear definitions of vacancy and the underuse of the building stock that reflect national and local conditions and provide the foundation for effective mapping, screening and prioritization activities.

Habitat for Humanity proposes the following classification of vacant and underused buildings and housing units:

Vacant and underused
non-residential buildings
(public and private)

Vacant and underused
residential buildings
(public and private)

Vacant and underused
housing units
(public and private)

The first category includes buildings originally designed for non-residential purposes that have remained vacant or underused for an extended period and no longer fulfil their intended function. These may include vacant office buildings, administrative buildings, commercial premises, retail spaces, or industrial and mixed-use properties. Both publicly and privately owned assets can fall within this category.

The conversion of non-residential buildings often requires **significant technical intervention, including changes to building layouts, changes of use and building classification, compliance with residential standards and upgrades to accessibility, safety and energy performance requirements**. In many cases, projects must also overcome **zoning and land-use restrictions**, which can add considerable time and complexity to the approval process. As a result, they are among the most complex building types to reuse.

At the same time, many non-residential buildings are located in urban areas with strong housing demand and access to transport, utilities and social infrastructure. When suitable conditions are in place, their conversion can offer a significant opportunity to expand affordable housing supply while making productive use of existing building stock.

Kalush, Ukraine

Converting a vacant public building into affordable housing

Context

Acute housing shortages and large-scale displacement

Approach

Based on vacancy assessment, service availability and community needs

Outcome

Functionally obsolete public building repurposed for housing with 48 housing units



Before



After



Underused public building



Affordable housing for displaced families

Converting a vacant non-residential building

A former kindergarten building in Ukraine was converted into affordable housing for internally displaced families following Russia's full-scale invasion. The project was implemented in a context of acute housing shortages and large-scale displacement, and only after local authorities had determined that the building had remained underused for many years and that alternative kindergarten facilities were available to meet local childcare needs.

This example illustrates how functionally obsolete public buildings can, in specific circumstances, be repurposed for housing when assessed within a broader vacancy mapping, screening and prioritization framework that considers local housing demand, service provision and community needs.

Budapest, Hungary

Converting a vacant public building into social housing

Context

Severe housing affordability pressures and rising rents in Budapest

Approach

Vacancy identification, building assessment and conversion of a long-term vacant public building into social housing

Outcome

26 new public housing units created through the renovation and conversion of a vacant public building



Before



Future



Long-term vacant school building



26 new public housing units

Converting a vacant public building into social housing

A former school building in Budapest, vacant since 2007, is being transformed into 26 new public housing units through a municipality-led project supported by the European Union. The first tenants are expected to move in in 2027.

The project responds to severe housing affordability pressures in Budapest, where rising rents have increasingly limited access to adequate housing. Alongside the renovation of the school building, the municipality is assessing other vacant and underused properties to identify opportunities for future housing conversion.

This example demonstrates how long-term vacant public buildings can be repurposed for affordable housing as part of a broader vacancy identification, screening and prioritization framework aligned with local housing needs.

Vacant and underused
non-residential buildings
(public and private)

Vacant and underused
residential buildings
(public and private)

Vacant and underused
housing units
(public and private)

This category refers to entire buildings originally designed for residential use, where either all or

most of their housing units have remained vacant for an extended period. It includes residential buildings that have become uninhabitable due to deterioration or a lack of maintenance, vacant tenement houses affected by unresolved inheritance or ownership disputes, as well as properties deliberately kept empty for speculative purposes.

Unlike non-residential buildings, these properties are already designed for housing and therefore often require less complex functional adaptation. However, their mobilization is frequently constrained by legal, ownership and technical barriers. More precisely, **uncertainty regarding ownership, unknown construction risks, the need to comply with modern building and energy-efficiency standards, and potential heritage protection requirements** significantly delay or prevent renovation.

The viability of bringing vacant residential buildings back into use also depends on local housing market conditions. In some areas, long-term vacancy may reflect weak housing demand, while in others these buildings represent a significant opportunity to expand affordable housing supply through renovation and reuse.

Bytom, Poland Renovating vacant residential building

Context

Existing infrastructure and services in established urban areas

Approach

Targeted renovation addressing technical deterioration and energy-efficiency standards

Outcome

Increased affordable housing supply while preserving urban fabric



Before



After



Renovating vacant residential building

A late 19th-century tenement building in Bytom was renovated and converted into four affordable housing units.

The project addressed both, the technical deterioration of the building and the challenges associated with bringing historic residential stock up to contemporary housing and energy-efficiency standards.

This example demonstrates how vacant residential buildings can be returned to use through targeted renovation, preserving existing urban fabric while expanding the supply of affordable housing in areas with existing infrastructure and services.

Vacant and underused
non-residential buildings
(public and private)

Vacant and underused
residential buildings
(public and private)

Vacant and underused
housing units
(public and private)

Vacant and underused housing units refer to individual apartments, flats or dwellings. Vacancy may arise for a variety of reasons, including ownership transitions, legal disputes, renovation needs, speculative holding practices, changing housing market conditions or the absence of sufficient housing demand in a particular location.

Compared to the renovation of entire buildings or the conversion of non-residential properties, transforming vacant housing units back into use requires less physical intervention. Common measures include energy-efficiency upgrades, accessibility improvements, interior refurbishment

or minor alterations to meet current housing standards. Nevertheless, funding and technical capacities remain equally important. As principal barriers to reuse are primarily institutional, financial and behavioral, **policy measures should aim at incentivizing, facilitating or, where appropriate, encouraging the mobilization of vacant housing units.** Such measures can include targeted financial support, taxation measures, vacancy regulations, advisory services and simplified administrative procedures.

This category therefore represents one of the most immediate opportunities to increase housing supply. While vacant housing units should be included in vacancy inventories and monitoring systems, their mobilization must address policy, financial and administrative measures to incentivise their return to use.

Warsaw, Poland
Renovating vacant housing units

Context Existing infrastructure and services in established urban areas	Approach Targeted renovation addressing technical deterioration and energy-efficiency standards	Outcome Increased affordable housing supply while preserving urban fabric
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Before



After




Renovating vacant housing units

Through its housing programmes in Warsaw and Dąbrowa Górnicza, Habitat for Humanity Poland has renovated and returned dozens of long-vacant apartments to use as affordable housing. The projects demonstrate how underused housing units can be mobilised relatively fast compared to larger building renovation or conversion schemes. They also highlight the importance of combining targeted renovation support with institutional, financial and organisational mechanisms that help overcome barriers preventing vacant homes from re-entering the housing market. In areas with high housing demand, the mobilisation of existing housing units can provide an immediate and cost-effective contribution to affordable housing supply.

Across Europe, **numerous tools have been developed to map and assess vacancy** across all three types identified. They range from GIS-based modelling approaches to practical toolkits supporting local authorities. While such initiatives demonstrate the value of systematic vacancy identification, they are often tailored to specific building types, geographies or policy objectives.

This highlights the need for a **more integrated approach, combining vacancy mapping with demand-sensitive building typologies, intervention pathways and governance arrangements.** The Framework presented below is intended to contribute to this discussion by bringing these elements together within a single analytical structure. It illustrates how the systematic identification, categorization and prioritization of vacant buildings and housing units may be approached across different European contexts.

3. Habitat for Humanity's model

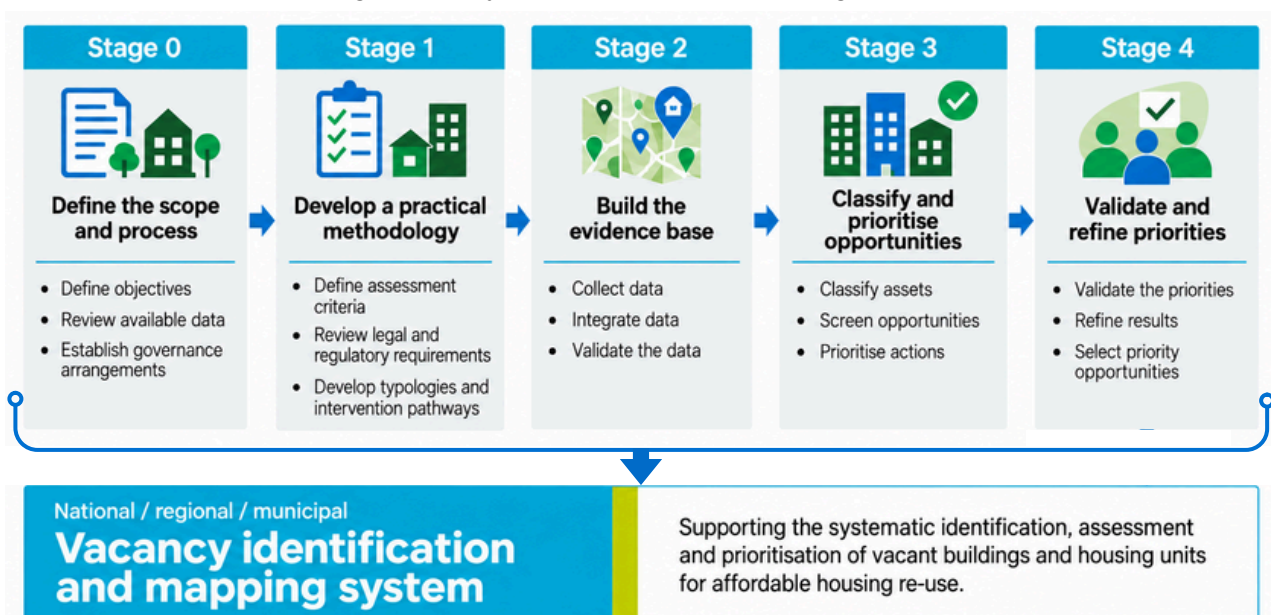
The 4-stage vacancy identification and mapping framework opportunity

Informed by practical experience from pilot initiatives, Habitat for Humanity's **4-Stage Vacancy Identification and Mapping Framework ("Mapping Framework")** presents a structured approach to the systematic identification, categorization and prioritization of vacant buildings and housing units. Rather than relying solely on resource-intensive building-by-building assessments, the framework explores how vacancy mapping can be combined with building typologies, screening criteria and standardized intervention pathways. This can support a better understanding of the scale, location and characteristics of vacant stock, while contributing to a stronger evidence base for affordable housing, urban regeneration and building reuse policies.

The framework is intended to support discussion on **the development of national and local vacancy mapping systems and on approaches for identifying priority assets and targeting resources more effectively**. Its added value lies in bringing together concepts, experiences and approaches that are often addressed separately. By linking vacancy categories, building typologies and intervention pathways, the framework provides a structured basis for analysing vacant buildings and housing units and for discussing how vacancy identification and mapping systems could be strengthened across different contexts.

How does the framework work?

A simplified overview of Habitat for Humanity's 4-stage vacancy identification and mapping framework



The framework should be understood as a **practical starting point for discussion and further refinement** rather than a prescriptive model or ready-to-use policy tool. In particular, it focuses on the **upstream stages of the process, namely the identification, definition, mapping, classification and prioritisation of vacant buildings and housing units.**

For the purposes of this paper, **affordable housing reuse** encompasses the renovation of vacant residential buildings, the conversion of vacant non-residential buildings and the mobilization of vacant housing units.

The subsequent stages required to bring vacant assets back into use, including detailed feasibility studies, project development, financing and implementation, fall beyond the scope of this paper. The framework is therefore intended to contribute to ongoing discussions among policymakers and practitioners on **how vacancy mapping can support the mobilisation of vacant buildings and housing units for affordable housing and broader social objectives.**



Establishing the Mapping Framework

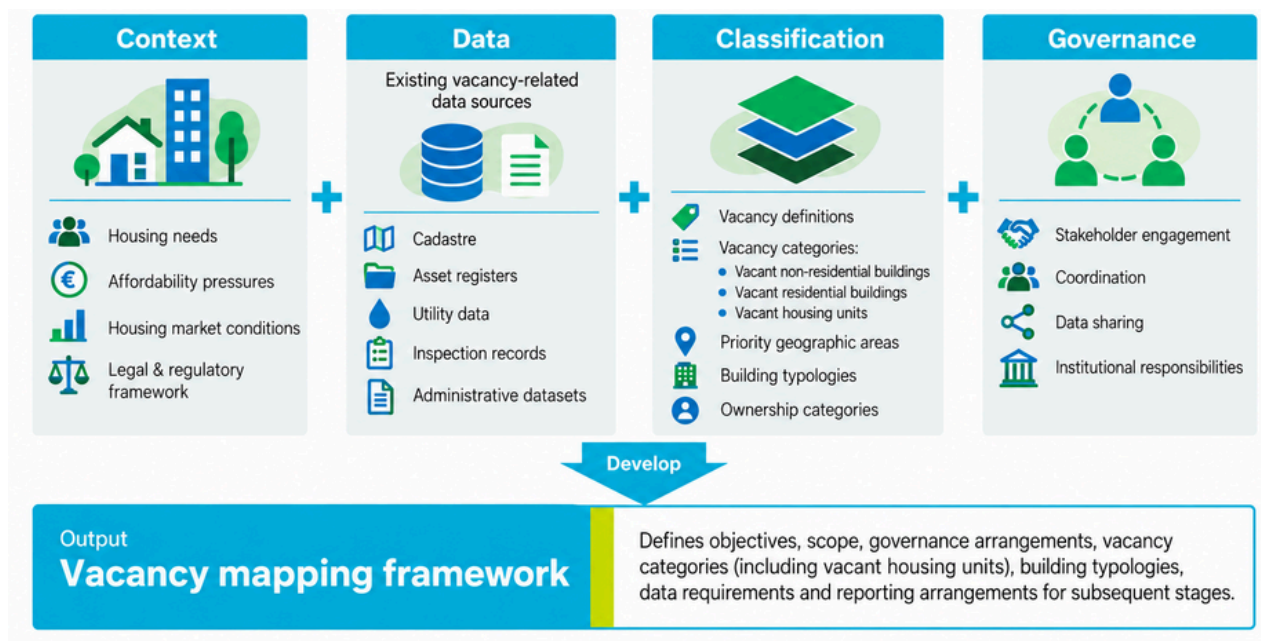
Stage 0 establishes the institutional, analytical and methodological foundations for a vacancy mapping system. Before data collection begins, the national, regional or local authority carrying out vacancy mapping should establish **the policy objectives, governance arrangements and key parameters that will guide the identification and prioritisation of vacant stock.** This stage should also establish the data collection system, including arrangements for how information from different datasets will be collected, shared, integrated and verified.

Stage 0 – Establish the Mapping Framework

Building the foundations for a vacancy identification and monitoring system

Key elements to assess and define

Before data collection begins, authorities should establish the parameters required for systematic vacancy identification, monitoring and prioritization



Stage 0 should also **establish preliminary vacancy categories and building typologies that will guide subsequent screening and categorization exercises**. These form the basis for developing standardized renovation, conversion and housing unit mobilization pathways, reducing reliance on resource-intensive building-by-building assessments and enabling a more strategic approach to prioritizing vacant stock.

A standardised assessment questionnaire may support this process by ensuring the systematic collection of comparable information while allowing for adaptation to national and local circumstances.

Primary output: Vacancy Mapping Framework – defines the objectives, scope, governance arrangements, vacancy categories (including vacant housing units), building typologies, data requirements and reporting arrangements that will guide subsequent vacancy identification, mapping, classification and prioritization activities.



Methodology development and Screening Framework

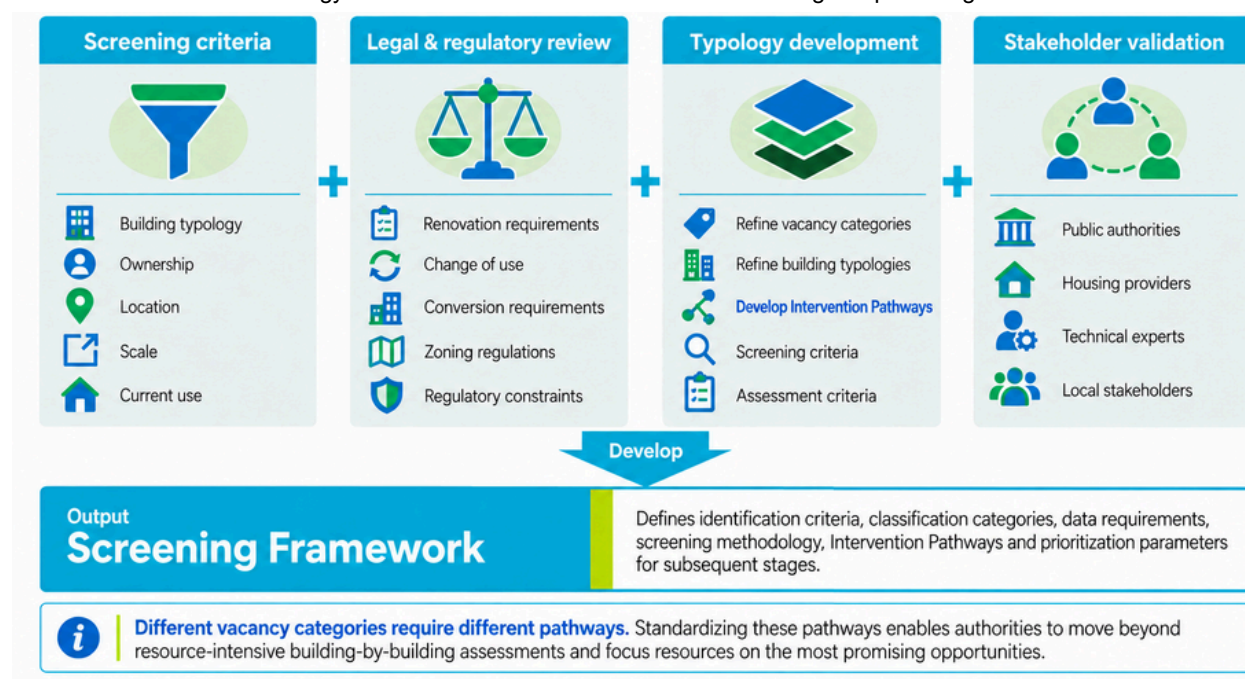
Stage 1 translates the Vacancy Mapping Framework (Stage 0) into a **practical methodology for identifying, categorizing and prioritizing vacant buildings**. The objective is to develop a Screening Framework consisting of the criteria, typologies and intervention pathways that will later be applied to vacancy data collected during Stage 2. By providing a structured basis for assessment, it helps **reduce uncertainty and improve prioritization**.

Stage 1 – Methodology development & Screening Framework

Developing the methodology required to identify, categorize and prioritize vacant buildings and housing units

Key components of the Screening Framework

The methodology should establish consistent criteria for screening and prioritizing vacant assets

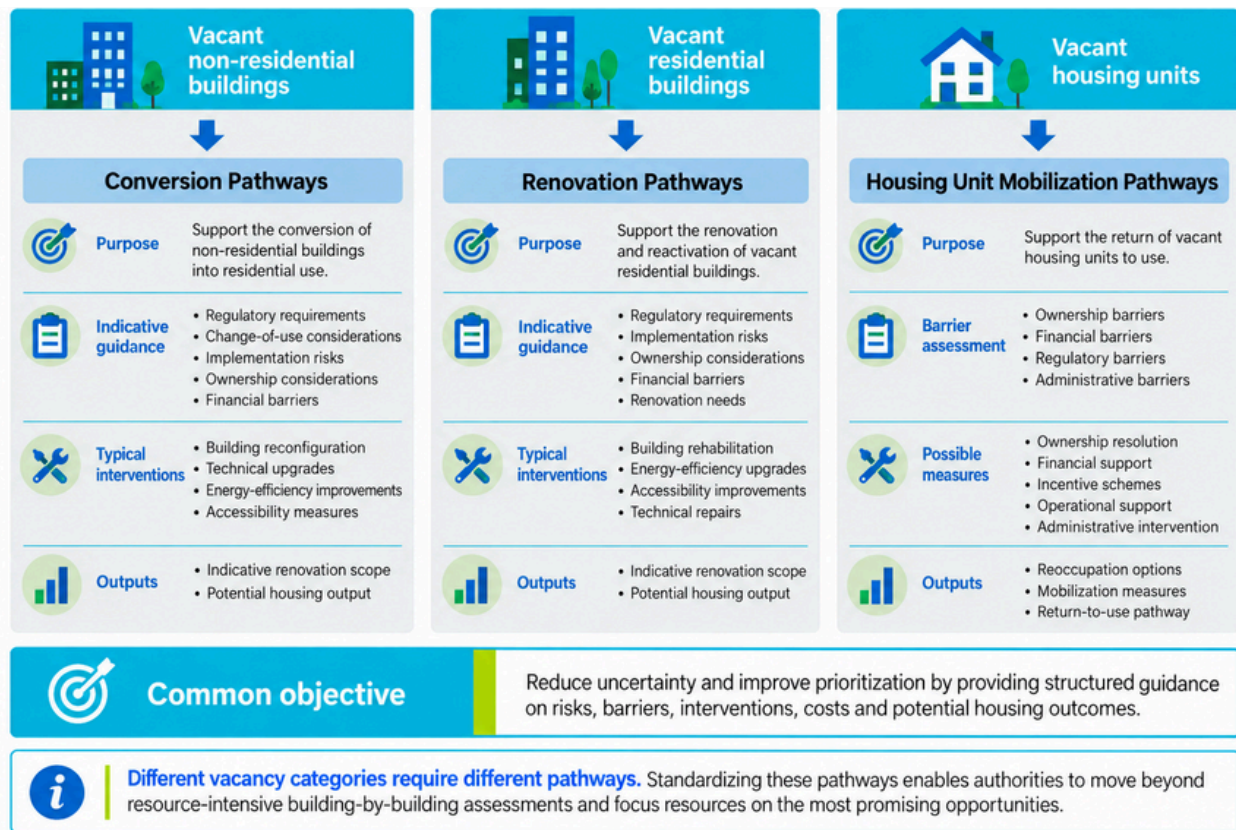


The Screening Framework brings together several complementary elements. Screening criteria help assess key characteristics of vacant assets, including ownership, location, scale and current use. A review of legal and regulatory requirements helps identify potential constraints related to re-use. Building typologies refine vacancy categories and support the development of intervention pathways, while stakeholder engagement helps ensure that the framework reflects practical implementation realities and local priorities.

Rather than relying exclusively on resource-intensive building-by-building assessments, the screening framework will support the categorisation of vacant buildings into groups with broadly comparable characteristics and re-use potential. This allows authorities to **identify priority assets more efficiently, establish consistent decision-making criteria and target detailed feasibility assessments towards the most promising opportunities.**

Intervention Pathways developed in Stage 1

Standardized pathways help reduce uncertainty, improve prioritization and support evidence-based decision-making



A key component of Stage 1 is the development of **intervention pathways** that reflect the different characteristics of vacant buildings and housing units. Rather than assuming that all vacant assets require the same approach, these pathways recognise that non-residential buildings, residential buildings and vacant housing units are associated with different opportunities, risks, regulatory requirements and implementation challenges. Within the broad categories of non-residential and residential buildings, intervention pathways may differ significantly between typologies, such as office buildings, schools, industrial buildings, historic tenement houses or post-war apartment blocks. As such, they provide a **structured basis for assessing potential interventions and identifying the most appropriate route towards re-use.**

Stage 1 transforms the strategic foundations established in Stage 0 into an operational methodology, providing authorities with the criteria, typologies and intervention pathways needed to systematically identify, assess and prioritise vacant buildings and housing units.

Primary outputs:

- **Screening Framework** – defines identification criteria, classification categories, data requirements, screening methodology, intervention pathways and prioritization parameters for subsequent stages;
- **Typology-Specific Renovation and Conversion Pathways** – indicative intervention pathways linked to specific building typologies, outlining common opportunities, constraints and requirements for renovation and conversion;
- **Housing Unit Mobilization Pathways** – describe how vacant housing units may be brought back into use through renovation, ownership resolution, financial support or regulatory and administrative measures.

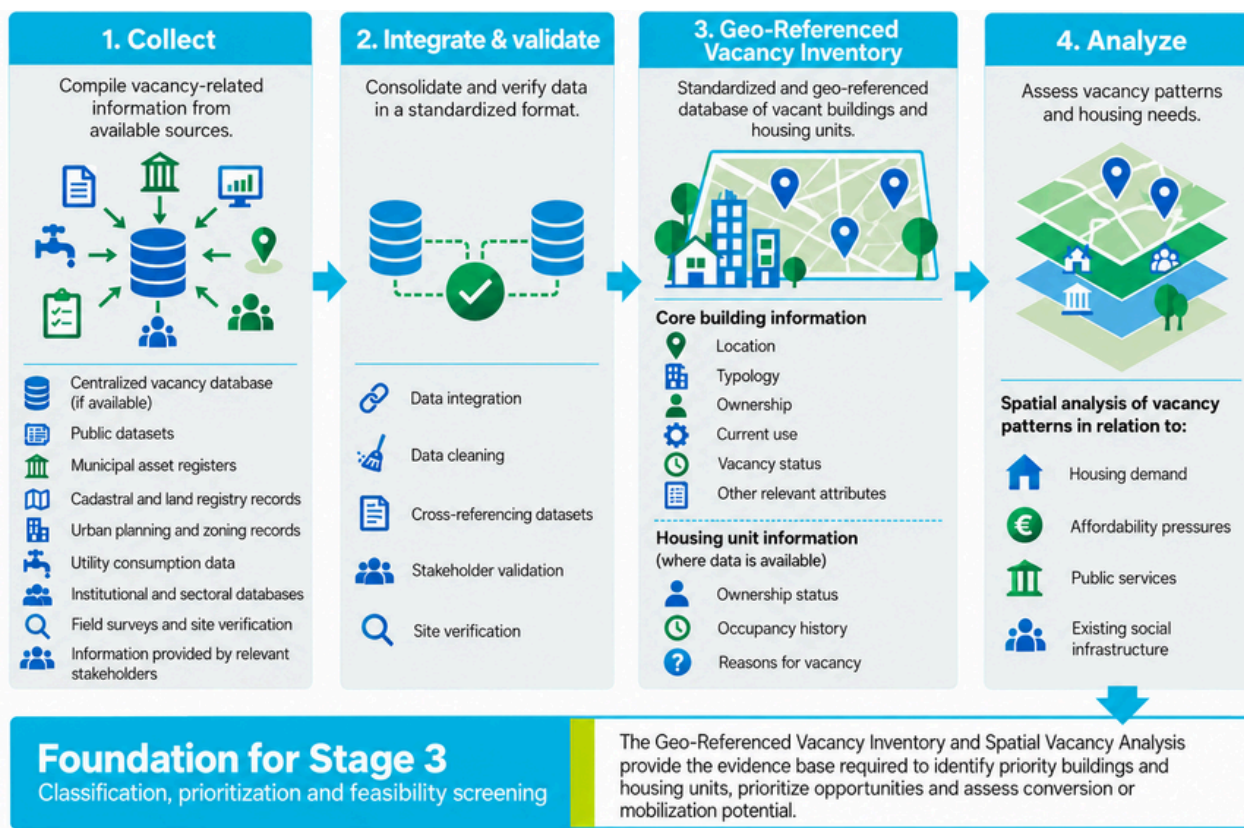


Data collection and vacancy mapping

Stage 2 focuses on the systematic collection, integration and verification of vacancy-related data. The objective is to **create a comprehensive and evidence-based inventory** of vacant and underused buildings and housing units that can subsequently be screened and prioritized using the framework developed in Stage 1.

Stage 2 – Data collection and vacancy mapping

Building the evidence base required for vacancy screening, prioritization and decision-making



The national, regional or local authority carrying out vacancy mapping should coordinate the collection and integration of data from multiple sources. Where no centralised vacancy database exists, data should be compiled from available sources, including public datasets, municipal asset registers, cadastral and land registry records, urban planning and zoning records or utility consumption data.

Collected data should be integrated and verified, for example through stakeholder engagement, site visits and cross-referencing between multiple sources wherever possible. The data should then be consolidated into a standardised and geo-referenced vacancy database (**Geo-referenced Vacancy Inventory**) documenting key building and housing unit characteristics such as location, typology, ownership, current use, vacancy status and other relevant attributes. Where data is available, inventories should also capture vacant housing units, including information on ownership status, occupancy history and reasons for vacancy.

The resulting database should support a spatial analysis of vacancy patterns in relation to housing demand, affordability pressures, public services and existing social infrastructure (**Spatial Vacancy Analysis**).

Together, the Geo-Referenced Vacancy Inventory and Spatial Vacancy Analysis provide a consistent evidence base for identifying priority areas, applying typology-specific screening criteria and targeting subsequent assessment efforts more effectively.

Primary outputs:

- **Geo-Referenced Vacancy Inventory** – a standardised and geo-referenced database containing validated information on vacant and underused buildings and housing units, including key characteristics such as location, typology, ownership, current use, vacancy status and other relevant attributes;
- **Spatial Vacancy Analysis** – an analysis of vacancy patterns in relation to housing demand, affordability pressures, public services and existing social infrastructure, providing an evidence base for identifying priority areas and supporting subsequent screening and prioritisation activities.



Classification, prioritization and feasibility screening

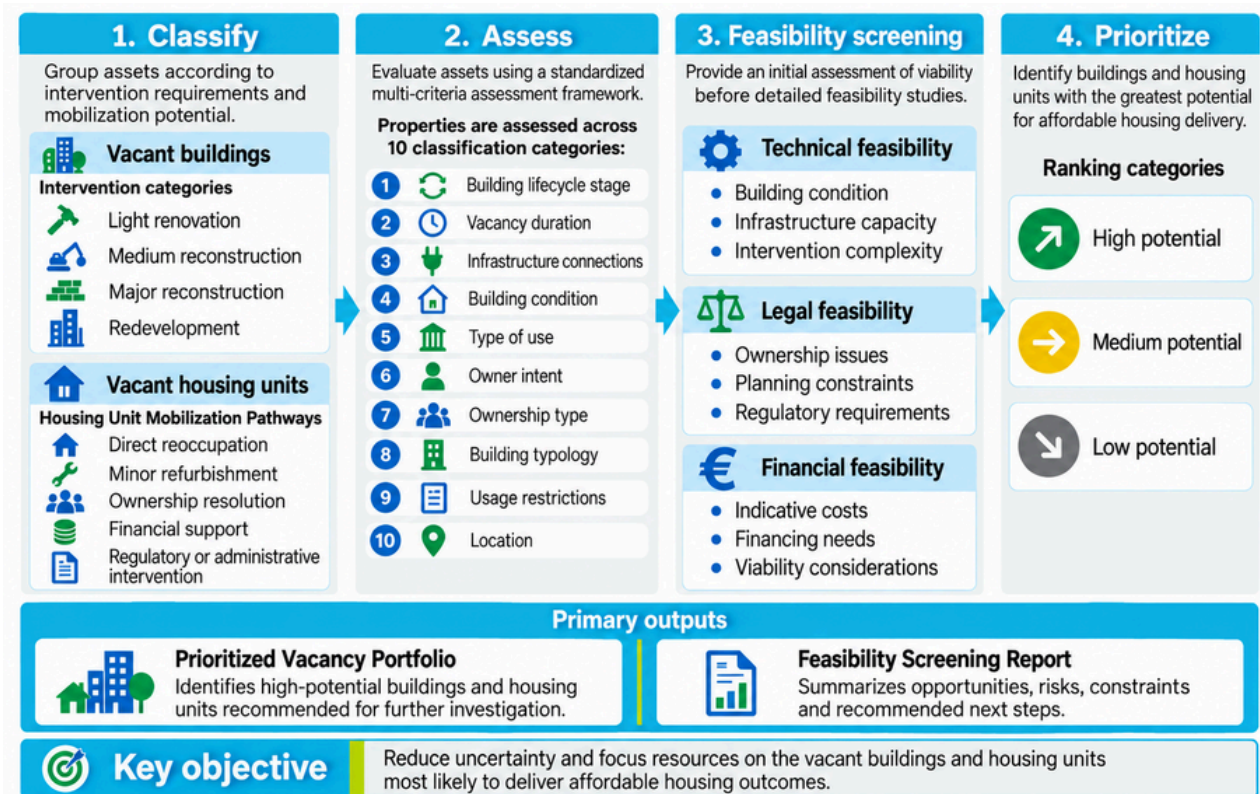
Stage 3 applies the Screening Framework developed in Stage 1, including the assessment criteria, building typologies and intervention pathways, to the Geo-Referenced Vacancy Inventory created in Stage 2. The objective is to **classify and prioritise vacant buildings** and housing units according to their potential for re-use, **while reducing uncertainty prior to detailed feasibility studies**.

At this stage, properties are grouped according to the scale of intervention likely to be required, ranging from light renovation to redevelopment, and assessed using a standardised set of classification criteria, such as building lifecycle stage, vacancy duration, owner intent,

ownership type, usage restrictions and location. An initial feasibility screening is then undertaken to identify key technical, legal and financial considerations.

Stage 3 – Classification, prioritization and feasibility screening

Applying the Screening Framework to identify the most promising opportunities for renovation, conversion and housing unit mobilization



Rather than replacing detailed project-specific feasibility studies, this screening provides a **high-level assessment of opportunities and constraints, helping to identify the most promising opportunities for affordable housing re-use**. It also enables the ranking of opportunities according to their potential, from high to medium and low priority.

Primary outputs:

- **Prioritized Vacancy Portfolio** – identifies high-potential buildings and housing units recommended for further investigation;
- **Feasibility Screening Report** – summarize key opportunities, risks, constraints and recommended next steps.

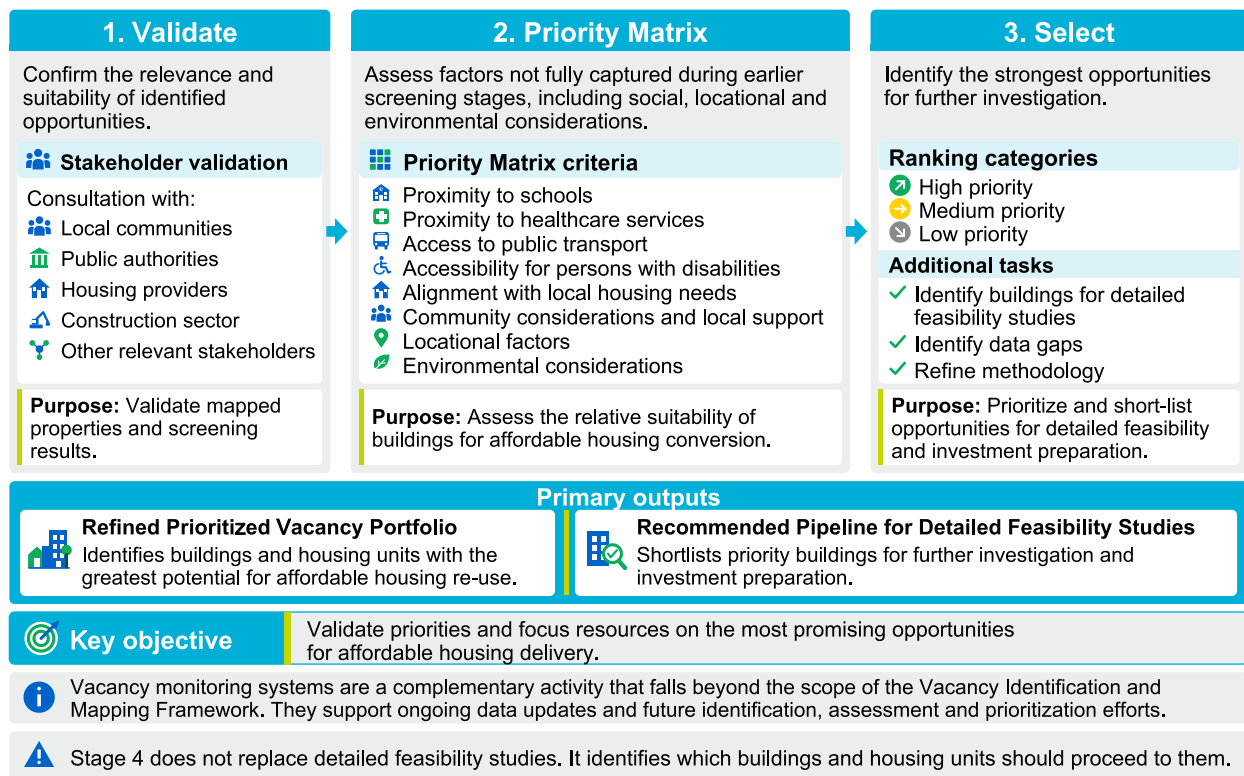


Validation and priority setting

Stage 4 validates the results of the vacancy mapping and screening process, to ensure that identified opportunities align with local housing needs, policy priorities and on-the-ground realities. The objective is **to establish a robust basis for selecting buildings that merit further investigation**.

Stage 4 – Validation and priority setting

Validating and refining priority assets before detailed feasibility assessment



First, mapped properties and screening results should be validated through consultation with relevant stakeholders. This should be complemented by the application of a **priority matrix assessing factors that may not be fully captured during earlier screening stages**, such as proximity to schools and healthcare services, access to public transport, accessibility, community considerations and local housing needs.

Based on this additional assessment, buildings and housing units should be ranked according to their relative priority and potential, enabling the identification of high-priority opportunities for detailed feasibility studies. The stage should also help identify remaining data gaps and areas where the methodology may require refinement.

The Framework provides a structured basis for establishing a systematic process for identifying, mapping, classifying and prioritising vacant buildings and housing units.

While the development of **permanent vacancy monitoring systems** falls beyond the scope of this paper, authorities should consider establishing arrangements for the periodic review and updating of vacancy data as a complementary activity. Together with vacancy mapping, such systems can help maintain an accurate evidence base and support future identification, assessment and prioritisation efforts.

Primary outputs:

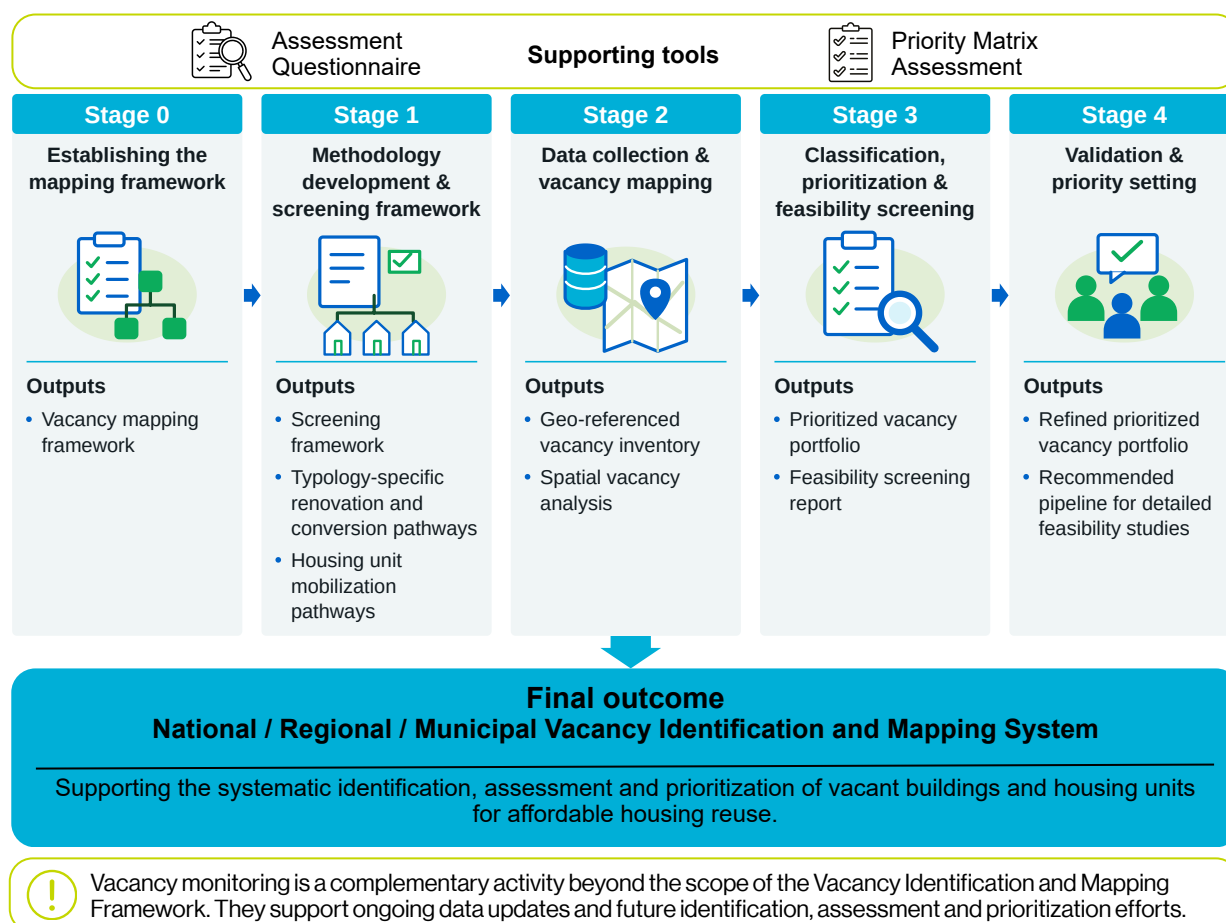
- **Refined Prioritized Vacancy Portfolio** – identifies buildings and housing units with the greatest potential for affordable housing re-use following stakeholder validation and application of the Priority Matrix.
- **Recommended Pipeline for Detailed Feasibility Studies** – identifies priority opportunities recommended for detailed technical, legal and financial assessment.

The Framework focuses on the identification, assessment and prioritisation of opportunities for affordable housing re-use. It **provides a structured approach for identifying, assessing and prioritizing vacant buildings and housing units**, allowing to focus resources on the most promising opportunities for affordable housing reuse. By reducing information gaps and uncertainty at an early stage, the Framework can also help create a more transparent pipeline of opportunities for further investigation through detailed feasibility studies, investment planning and project development.

The Framework generates **a sequence of practical outputs**, from a screening framework and typology-specific renovation, conversion and housing unit mobilization pathways to a geo-referenced vacancy inventory and spatial analysis. These outputs inform the development of a prioritized vacancy portfolio and feasibility screening report, followed by a validated and refined portfolio and a recommended pipeline for detailed feasibility studies. Together, they provide a structured evidence base for establishing a vacancy identification and mapping system at national, regional or municipal level, supporting informed decisions on opportunities for affordable housing reuse.

Building a Vacancy Identification and Mapping System

Key outputs of the 4-stage Vacancy Identification and Mapping Framework



Beyond supporting more informed decision-making, the Framework can contribute to a range of wider policy objectives. By facilitating the identification and mobilisation of vacant buildings and housing units, it can **support greater housing affordability, improve housing opportunities**

for vulnerable households, contribute to urban regeneration and neighbourhood revitalisation, and reduce carbon emissions through the reuse and renovation of existing building stock.

The establishment of a permanent vacancy monitoring system should be considered a subsequent step and falls beyond the scope of this paper. Such a system would require dedicated arrangements for the regular collection, verification, updating and maintenance of vacancy data to ensure that the Vacancy Inventory remains accurate and relevant over time.

Key benefits of the framework

1. Systematic vacancy identification

Integrates administrative, cadastral and inspection data into a coherent vacancy identification and monitoring system.

2. Reduced uncertainty

Identifies legal, ownership and regulatory barriers before major resources are committed.

3. Typology-based decision support & standardized pathways

Uses building typologies to support the development of standardized renovation and conversion pathways for buildings, as well as housing unit mobilization pathways that address ownership, financial and administrative barriers to reuse.

4. Stronger governance

Improves coordination, data sharing and implementation capacity across stakeholders.

5. Evidence-based prioritization

Focuses resources on assets with the greatest potential for housing re-use, renovation and conversion.

6. Replicable & scalable

Offers a structured basis that can inform approaches across different territories while accommodating national and local conditions.



The framework illustrates how vacancy identification, assessment and prioritisation can be approached in a more systematic, evidence-based and scalable manner.

Finally, the Framework should be understood primarily as a structured way of illustrating the complexity of vacancy identification, mapping and prioritisation, and as a starting point for discussion and further refinement rather than a prescriptive model or ready-made solution. The purpose of the Framework is not to provide a universally applicable tool, but to **bring together the key concepts, challenges and decision points involved in the process, helping to inform policy discussions and support the development of recommendations**. It is intended to contribute to ongoing exchanges among policymakers, practitioners and other stakeholders on how vacancy identification, mapping and prioritisation systems can be strengthened and adapted to different national, regional and local contexts.

4. Key Enablers

For unlocking vacant buildings and housing stock for affordable housing

The 4-Stage Vacancy Identification and Mapping Framework presented in Section 3 illustrates a possible approach to the systematic identification, classification and prioritization of vacant buildings and housing units. More broadly, it highlights the importance of establishing stronger vacancy identification and mapping systems as a foundation for evidence-based housing, renovation and urban regeneration policies.

Regardless of the specific methodologies adopted by individual countries or municipalities, **more systematic approaches to vacancy identification, mapping and data collection are needed across Europe.**

To support this objective, Habitat for Humanity recommends the following measures:

Recommendation 1	Recommendation 2	Recommendation 3
Recommendation 4	Recommendation 5	Recommendation 6

Recommendation 1: Establish an EU Framework for Vacancy Identification and Mapping (the European Commission should encourage Member States to establish systematic vacancy identification and mapping systems to support the renovation and conversion of existing building stock into affordable housing):

A common European approach to vacancy identification and monitoring helps to create a more consistent evidence base for building reuse and affordable housing policies. To support the delivery of affordable housing through reuse of existing stock, as envisaged under the European Affordable Housing Plan, the Commission should promote the development of national vacancy inventories, building typologies and typology-specific conversion or renovation pathways. This could be supported through an Affordable Housing Act or other relevant legislative, policy and funding instruments. The Commission should also promote common principles for vacancy definitions, data collection and reporting, while allowing Member States sufficient flexibility to adapt methodologies to national and regional circumstances.

Recommendation 1	Recommendation 2	Recommendation 3
Recommendation 4	Recommendation 5	Recommendation 6

Recommendation 2: Provide EU funding, technical assistance and knowledge-sharing support (the European Commission should provide targeted funding, technical assistance and knowledge-sharing mechanisms to support the development and maintenance of vacancy mapping systems across the European Union):

The successful implementation of vacancy mapping systems will require dedicated financial resources, technical expertise and opportunities for peer learning across Member States.

Financial and technical support should be embedded within existing EU programmes and reinforced under the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). The planned Pan-European Investment Platform for Affordable and Sustainable Housing should also include dedicated instruments supporting vacancy mapping, the development of national vacancy inventories, and the preparation of building typologies and conversion pathways.

To accelerate the uptake of successful approaches, the Commission should facilitate knowledge-sharing between Member States, regions and municipalities through the European Housing Alliance and promote vacancy mapping and building reuse as recurring themes at the European Housing Summit and other relevant housing policy forums.

Recommendation 1	Recommendation 2	Recommendation 3
Recommendation 4	Recommendation 5	Recommendation 6

Recommendation 3: Develop National Vacancy Inventories and Reuse Frameworks (Member States should establish legal and institutional frameworks for the systematic identification and mapping of vacant and underused buildings, as well as for the development of typology-specific re-use pathways):

National governments play a critical role in translating European objectives into operational vacancy mapping systems. To achieve this, Member States should establish the legal and institutional frameworks required for the systematic identification and mapping of vacant and underused buildings, and for the development of typology-specific reuse pathways reflecting different building and housing unit categories.

National housing strategies, housing plans and relevant legislation should include mechanisms requiring or enabling the development of:

- national or regional vacancy inventories;
- standardised definitions of vacancy and underuse;
- building typologies reflecting national building stock characteristics;
- typology-specific reuse pathways, including the renovation of vacant residential buildings, the conversion of vacant non-residential buildings, and the mobilization of vacant housing units;
- interoperable data-sharing arrangements between relevant public authorities.

Such measures strengthen the evidence base for housing policy and enable public authorities to identify buildings and housing units with the greatest potential for affordable housing conversion.

Recommendation 1	Recommendation 2	Recommendation 3
Recommendation 4	Recommendation 5	Recommendation 6

Recommendation 4: Strengthen Data Sharing and Public Sector Coordination (Member States should improve the availability and interoperability of vacancy-related data across public administrations):

Effective vacancy mapping depends on the ability to combine data from multiple public sources. Vacancy information is often fragmented and dispersed across various sources. National governments should establish data-sharing arrangements and governance mechanisms that allow responsible authorities to consolidate relevant datasets into comprehensive vacancy inventories while respecting national and European data protection requirements.

Member States should also promote the development of interoperable digital vacancy mapping systems that facilitate the integration, visualization and analysis of vacancy-related data. This may include the use of GIS-based platforms, digital building databases, Digital Twins and AI-supported analytical tools to strengthen vacancy identification, improve data quality and support evidence-based decision-making.

Enhanced coordination between housing, planning, land administration and infrastructure authorities is essential to create reliable and up-to-date vacancy identification, mapping and monitoring systems.

Recommendation 1	Recommendation 2	Recommendation 3
Recommendation 4	Recommendation 5	Recommendation 6

Recommendation 5: Support Local and Regional Authorities Conducting Vacancy Mapping (where vacancy mapping is delegated to regional or local authorities, these authorities should receive adequate financial resources, technical assistance and capacity-building support):

Ultimately, the success of vacancy identification efforts depends on implementation capacities at regional and local levels. Therefore, the relevant authorities should be supported through adequate financial resources, technical assistance and capacity-building support.

Generally, local authorities possess the most detailed knowledge of local building stock and housing needs. However, they frequently lack the resources required to establish systematic vacancy identification and/or monitoring systems. Capacity-building programmes adapted by the European Commission should therefore support:

- data collection and management;
- stakeholder coordination;
- vacancy inventory development;
- application of screening and prioritisation methodologies;
- use of building typologies and conversion pathways;
- use of GIS tools, digital building databases and other digital vacancy mapping solutions.

Strengthening local capacity will improve the quality of vacancy data and increase the effectiveness of subsequent conversion initiatives.

Recommendation 1	Recommendation 2	Recommendation 3
Recommendation 4	Recommendation 5	Recommendation 6

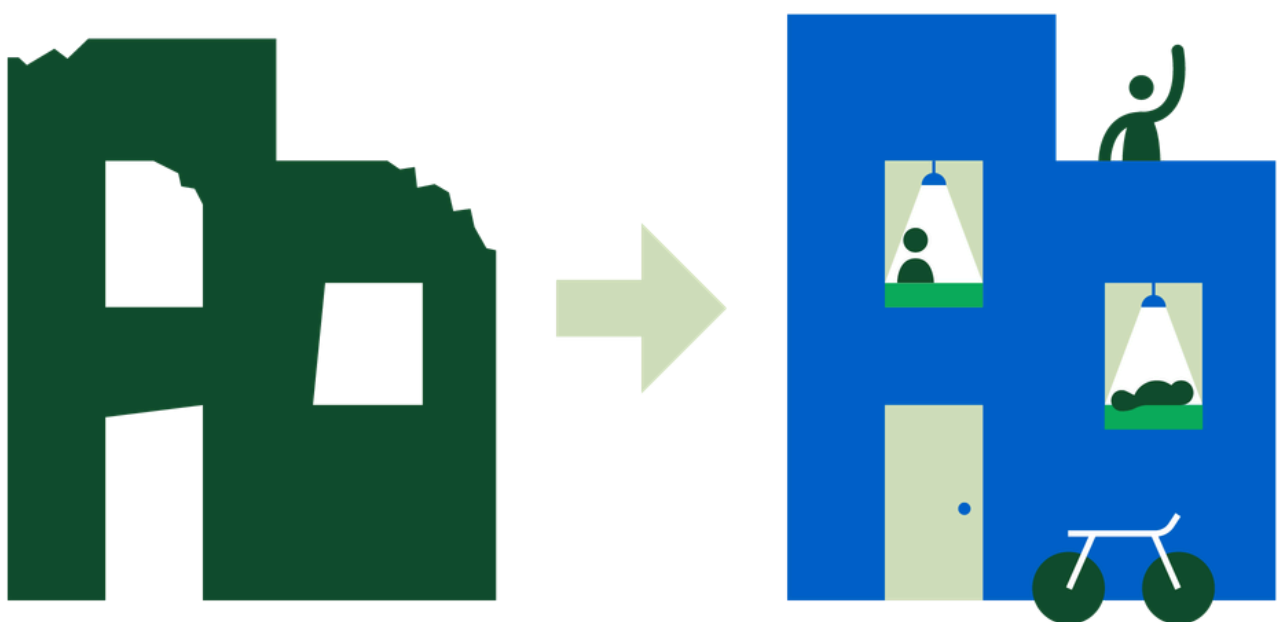
Recommendation 6: Institutionalise Regular Vacancy Monitoring (vacancy mapping should be treated as a continuous public function rather than a one-off exercise):

Vacancy mapping should not be treated as a one-off exercise, but as a permanent component of housing governance.

National, regional and local authorities should establish procedures for the regular review and updating of vacancy inventories, integrated into broader housing monitoring and planning systems. Regular updates will help ensure that vacancy data remains accurate, reflects changing housing market conditions and supports the continuous identification of opportunities for affordable housing delivery through building reuse and conversion.

By institutionalizing vacancy monitoring, public authorities can move from reactive interventions towards a strategic pipeline of buildings suitable for future renovation and conversion.

Together, these measures provide a structured basis for identifying, assessing and prioritising vacant buildings and housing units for affordable housing re-use. By establishing a stronger evidence base, Member States can move from fragmented and reactive interventions towards a more strategic approach to unlocking the potential of vacant stock. At a time of growing housing needs and increasing pressure to reduce the environmental footprint of the built environment, greater attention should be given to vacancy identification and mapping as a means of informing housing, renovation and urban regeneration policies across Europe.



Supplementary glossary

This glossary accompanies the policy brief series “*Unlocking Vacant Buildings for Affordable Housing*” [link] and provides a common set of definitions used throughout the three documents. It is intended to support a consistent understanding of key concepts related to vacancy identification, mapping, prioritisation and affordable housing reuse. Unless otherwise indicated, definitions reflect the terminology proposed by Habitat for Humanity for the purposes of discussion and further refinement rather than as universally established classifications.

- **Affordable housing reuse** – the reactivation of vacant stock for affordable housing purposes through the renovation of vacant residential buildings, the conversion of vacant non-residential buildings, or the mobilisation of vacant housing units.
- **Conversion / adaptive reuse** – the process of adapting vacant or underused non-residential buildings for residential use.
- **Feasibility screening** – a high-level preliminary assessment to identify the most promising vacant buildings and housing units for further investigation. It considers key technical, legal and financial factors influencing the potential for affordable housing reuse (technical feasibility: building condition, infrastructure capacity and intervention complexity; legal feasibility: ownership issues, planning and zoning constraints, and regulatory requirements; financial feasibility: indicative costs, financing needs and viability considerations). Unlike detailed feasibility studies, feasibility screening supports prioritisation rather than project approval or investment decisions.
- **Feasibility Screening Report** – summary of key opportunities, risks, constraints and recommended next steps (output of Stage 3).
- **Geo-Referenced Vacancy Inventory** – a standardized and geo-referenced database containing validated information on vacant and underused buildings and housing units, including key characteristics such as location, typology, ownership, current use, vacancy status and other relevant attributes (output of Stage 2).
- **Housing Unit Mobilisation Pathways** – structured approaches describing how vacant housing units may be brought back into use through renovation, ownership resolution, financial support, or regulatory and administrative measures (output of Stage 1).
- **Mobilization of vacant housing units** – measures aimed at returning vacant or underused housing units to the housing market, including affordable housing provision.
- **Prioritized Vacancy Portfolio** – identification of high-potential buildings and housing units recommended for further investigation (output of Stage 3).
- **Recommended Pipeline for Detailed Feasibility Studies** – identification of priority opportunities recommended for detailed technical, legal and financial assessment (output of Stage 4).
- **Refined Prioritised Vacancy Portfolio** – identification of buildings and housing units with the greatest potential for affordable housing reuse following stakeholder validation and application of the Priority Matrix (output of Stage 4).
- **Renovation** – the process of upgrading, rehabilitating or improving vacant and underused

residential buildings and housing units to bring them back into use.

- **Screening Framework** – defines identification criteria, classification categories, data requirements, screening methodology, intervention pathways and prioritization parameters for subsequent stages (output of Stage 1).
- **Spatial Vacancy Analysis** – an analysis of vacancy patterns in relation to housing demand, affordability pressures, public services and existing social infrastructure, providing an evidence base for identifying priority areas and supporting subsequent screening and prioritization activities (output of Stage 2).
- **Typology-Specific Renovation and Conversion Pathways** – indicative intervention pathways linked to specific building typologies, outlining common opportunities, constraints and requirements associated with renovation and conversion (output of Stage 1).
- **Vacancy Mapping Framework** – defines the objectives, scope, governance arrangements, vacancy categories (including vacant housing units), building typologies, data requirements and reporting arrangements that will guide subsequent vacancy identification, mapping, classification and prioritization activities (output of Stage 0).
- **Vacant and Underused Housing Units** – individual apartments, flats or dwellings. Vacancy may arise for a variety of reasons, including ownership transitions, legal disputes, renovation needs, speculative holding practices, changing housing market conditions or the absence of sufficient housing demand in a particular location.
- **Vacant and Underused Non-Residential Buildings** – buildings originally designed for non-residential purposes that have remained vacant or underused for an extended period and no longer fulfil their intended function. These may include vacant office buildings, administrative buildings, commercial premises, retail spaces, or industrial and mixed-use properties. Both publicly and privately owned assets can fall within this category.
- **Vacant and Underused Residential Buildings** – entire buildings originally designed for residential use, where either all or most of their housing units have remained vacant for an extended period. It includes residential buildings that have become uninhabitable due to deterioration or a lack of maintenance, vacant tenement houses affected by unresolved inheritance or ownership disputes, as well as properties deliberately kept empty for speculative purposes.
- **Vacant and underused stock** – encompasses empty housing units within otherwise occupied residential buildings, vacant residential properties, unused public and civic buildings, as well as increasingly obsolete office, commercial and industrial premises.

About Habitat for Humanity

Habitat for Humanity is a movement of people in your local area and around the world, working together to build more prosperous and vibrant communities by making sure everyone has a safe, affordable place to call home. Since our founding in 1976, together we have helped more than 62 million people globally build their futures on their own terms through access to decent housing. We've done that by working alongside people of all walks of life to build, repair and finance their homes, by innovating new ways of building and financing, and by advocating for policies that make constructing and accessing housing easier for everyone. Together, we build homes, communities and hope. To learn more, visit [habitat.org](https://www.habitat.org)

Credits

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