

Changing Values

Motivations for Adaptive Reuse in Urban Development

Cecilia Sundström

KTH – Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, Sweden, cesun@kth.se

Abstract

On what grounds are some buildings deemed valuable to retain while others are demolished? With an accelerating climate crisis and the significant environmental impact of the construction industry, there is reason to question whether new buildings are needed or if we should make do with what we already have. An adaptive reuse first approach would significantly alter our relationship to heritage, expanding its meaning beyond monumentality to include ordinary spaces of memory. This text looks at retention of the mundane, more recent and perhaps overlooked layers of history—our future heritage. Drawing on sociology and valuation studies, it considers adaptive reuse in light of sustainability considerations to examine actors' motivations for choosing adaptive reuse before demolition in urban development. Through a qualitative analysis of a central Stockholm development project, this paper seeks to make a wider claim about preconditions for adaptive reuse, suggesting changing geopolitical conditions can change value attribution in favour of retention. Ultimately, it argues for the potential of crises to challenge conventional practice, opening the possibility of new valuations that could significantly alter our relationship to heritage in urban development, recognising and including all its layers.

Keywords: Sustainability, Urban Development, Framing

Introduction

What motivates actors to retain rather than demolish? Why are some buildings more suitable than others for retrofitting? History, rather than confined to monumentality and grandeur, is also produced by ordinary people living everyday lives in unremarkable environments. This paper tends to these mundane layers of our cities which form part of our memory and social fabric, provide an urban sense of continuity and foster a connection to place. With growing sustainability concerns there is reason to extend the lifecycles of buildings that go beyond heritage, but also for its benefit. Adaptive reuse is increasingly acknowledged for its potential to address urgent challenges (Lanz, Pendlebury 2022). Principles of repair, reuse and extending the lifespan of buildings are key aspects of a circular transition. This is increasingly reflected in policy, such as the European Union's waste hierarchy, or the retention-first guidelines by the Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (Boverket 2023, Boverket 2025). The built environment sector is responsible for around 37% of global energy-related carbon emissions (United Nations Environment Programme 2023, 1) and the industry's waste is over a third of the European Union's total waste (European Commission no date). The citizens' initiative House Europe!, launched in 2025,

has estimated that at ongoing pace, over 2 billion square meters of space in Europe will have been demolished by 2050. This staggering figure is equivalent to half of Germany's building stock, according to the initiative. Instead, new square meters will be built as replacement. In response, proposals have emerged to halt new construction altogether (Malterre-Barthes 2025). Such a paradigm shift could replace a convention of demolition with a more caring approach, where architecture is about repair and reconfiguration rather than new designs. Adaptive reuse is often examined through architecture and spatial practices. Beyond buildings of "obvious" value, however, we know very little about the socio-material processes behind decisions to retain, which is where this study seeks to fill a knowledge gap. Methodologically, the research is based on semi-structured interviews and a document analysis. Interviewed participants include representatives from developers, the City's planning and development offices, as well as a politician from the City Council. Through purposeful sampling the document analysis spanned a ten-year period from 2015-2025, focusing on project milestones. All interviews and documents are in Swedish, and quotations have been translated by the author.

Boosting Economic Growth

For the past few decades, adaptive reuse has been given a renewed meaning for its potential to spur economic growth and improve urban qualities. The term *heritage creation* describes the invention of sometimes fictional historic narratives to improve real estate value in city development (Boltanski, Esquerre 2020, 22). Ascribing historic value and attributing stories to buildings, previously deemed uninteresting and due for demolition, allow them to be transformed into assets. Industrial buildings have been particularly prone to adaptive reuse, often housing programmes for arts and culture. This can be traced to urbanist Richard Florida's ideas of attracting a creative class to boost economic growth, as old warehouses and factories with cranes or chimneys are used to create an attractive aesthetic (Thörn, Holgersson 2014). The link between economic growth and particular features is also visible on an urban level. The empirical case presented in this study, Alviks strand, was born at a time of New Urbanism ideals. These emerged from Jane Jacob's criticism of modernism's clean-sweep approach and separation of functions (Metzger, Wiberg 2017, 2301). The ideal was a walkable, compact, mixed-use neighbourhood with active ground floors, shops and cafes, and proximity to public transport. This was considered sustainable but there is also an economic aspect as the model generates profits for developers and a tax base for municipalities (Tunström, Bradley 2014, 82).

Framing and Valuation Practices

Determining value is not just a question of spatial assessment—is a building salvageable? It relates to questions of what should be, what is important, just or good. The theoretical framework – a combination of valuation studies and framing theory—was selected for its ability to explain social processes of valuation. How values are articulated, by whom and for what purpose affect what types of spaces we consider possible and, ultimately, what is built. It is therefore a topic deserving attention (Molnar 2024).

Valuation studies has typically presented a conflict between an object's inherent qualities versus subjective attributions. The dominant approach often leans towards the latter, approaching value as a social construct. Valuation is not just a set of qualities waiting to be

discovered. It is a verb—an activity with production of value emerging from its practices. Vatin (2013, 5) illustrates the distinction in the French language between evaluation (*évaluer*), meaning assessment of value, and valorisation (*valoriser*), the activity of making something valuable. If value is a social production, it is fair to ask whether authentic values exist at all or whether they are merely a concealment of self-interest. Escaping this dualism, Heinich (2020) points to Max Weber's book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, where Weber argues for the correlation between capitalist development and protestant moral values praising hard work. Heinich (2020) argues that it is possible to both pursue private interests while considering common values. Is such a 'third way' possible in the relationship between sustainability and economic viability?

Sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) presented the concept of frame, a script or a set of rules that determine what we find meaningful in a situation—a way of making sense of the world. Framing is the organising principle defining how actors perceive and describe their realities and what actions they find adequate. Different frameworks lead to different readings. A successful project, such as the case study, requires actors' active negotiation to align multiple frames. Previous studies have examined how framing and the articulation of value can produce subjective "facts" about what exists. Metzger and Wiberg (2017) explored processes of qualification of value in urban development where different frames resulted in multiple and incompatible accounts of reality. Where someone saw an area of low development and dilapidated building stock, another saw a coherent social structure and place identity. The study highlights the importance of framing in interpreting material qualities, describing realities and shaping decisions that produce urban environments. New knowledge—such as climate impact—can change cues on how to respond, resulting in frame-shifting practices.

Valuing Adaptive Reuse: The Case of Alviks Strand

Located just northwest of Stockholm's inner city, Alviks strand is a former industrial area characterised by its waterfront location and natural topography (Fig. 1). A new detailed development plan, led by the municipality, will enable redevelopment of the site's two adjacent plots. While part of the same plan proposal, each plot has a different developer and design team—and, more recently, a different approach to adaptive reuse. The southern plot, hereafter referred to as Plot A (Fig. 2), houses ten volumes, some of older and industrial character, including a 20th century factory building and a 1930s laboratory. It also contains six office buildings from around the 1980s, made of yellow brick and curved in form, prompting the nickname "banana buildings". All buildings have the same heritage assessment, an intermediate ranking of three. The northern Plot B is similarly mixed with industrial buildings and office volumes from the 1970s and 80s, in red brick and square in form (Fig. 3). All buildings on plot B have a heritage assessment in the lowest grade of three, indicating some heritage value.

In 2021 the City of Stockholm presented a plan proposal for Alviks strand; a mixed-use neighbourhood with 1,300 new homes. All prewar buildings were retained as well as—following critique from an earlier consultation—samples of the 1980s office buildings. The remaining postwar buildings were due for demolition, causing loud objections from architects and activists, who opposed the material waste and criticised a lack of appreciation for the 1980s' aesthetic qualities (Andersson 2022).



Fig. 1. Alviks strand, Stockholm. Plot A, centre, with curved office buildings. Plot B is just visible to the right (Linus Flodin, Bara Bild)

Alviks strand subsequently became subject to several spatial studies showing its adaptive reuse potential. As such, this text will not consider any spatial issues or question its feasibility. After the plan presentation, however, things changed. In 2022, the developer of Plot A suddenly halted the scheme and decided to remake it to retain all postwar volumes. In contrast, Developer B continued as planned to demolish its postwar structures in favour of new builds. What motivates these different decisions?

Defining Heritage: Pre and Postwar

Until the decision to remake the scheme, sustainability was not a guiding principle in the redevelopment. Heritage, however, has been continuously present in the discourse. Alviks strand was set to have “readable” historic links, yet very little of this is shown in the early plan proposal. An interviewee describes the developers’ initial approach as demolition “flush to the ground”, exempting the industrial buildings. There was a project ambition for existing fabric to be used as “far as possible” and new additions to “last over time”, suggesting an acceptance of reuse limits and that only new buildings can be permanent. On each site, all buildings have the same heritage assessments, showing different “annual rings”, yet despite having been built for a more similar function, the office buildings are less valued. Presumably age is a factor. Possibly aesthetics too. It is also possible that the difference includes values ascribed to interests associated with the design and material composition. A political representative highlights Stockholm’s many adaptive reuse projects in former industrial areas, arguing that it is heritage reasons that everybody understands. The retention of the industrial buildings indicates knowledge, acceptance and willingness to meet the old buildings on their terms whereas the office buildings are framed as difficult to transform. As the project develops and “sample” offices are retained, heritage becomes more inclusive. The mixed expressions of the different historic layers are seen to add character and diversity, reflecting a dominant cultural attitude towards authenticity and for things to be interesting (Lanz, Pendlebury 2022).

Conflicting Urban Qualities

An interviewed planner said: «time has caught up. I think in the future, you will look back and say that Alviks strand was right in this breaking point. Before Alviks strand you demolished to build new, that was kind of it. That’s what you did to use the land effectively and so on,

to create values». Alviks strand was planned to be a walkable, vibrant, safe and accessible neighbourhood, combining offices and residential units, in line with the dominant planning discourse of the time. The data suggests that much of the demolitions can be explained through these articulations of values, in particular the provision of urban qualities and



Fig. 2. Left. To be retained: A former factory in the foreground with postwar “banana buildings” in the back. Fig. 3. Right. Due for demolition: Plot B’s 1980s office buildings (Cecilia Sundström, 2025)

housing. Developer B argues it is impossible to create good living environments with the existing stock, and to comply with regulation. While considered part of Alvik’s identity, the steep topography was considered a barrier for accessibility and a lively neighbourhood. There is a conflict between the material qualities of the existing urban structure and the expectations of what a neighbourhood should be. Adaptive reuse is simply not considered able to deliver—until Developer A reconsiders. This causes a reassessment of the site, its qualities and what Alviks strand can be.

New Conditions from Global Crises

A contextual factor to note is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the office market. After the pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought more global uncertainty with further impact on the construction industry, including increased material costs, inflation and higher mortgage rates. This affected the housing market through changed demand and profit margins for new builds, which opened the possibility of a reassessment of the site’s profitability for Developer A. A representative acknowledges that reuse is expensive but said the economic conditions could help making sustainable decisions: «If the office market goes down and we get empty buildings, what do we do with them? If you can’t demolish, you have to adapt». They add: «the construction cost increases a lot and perhaps that means that well, then we have to make do with what we have».

Conflicting Frames

While the catalyst for the reassessment can be traced to new economic conditions, it was made possible through an alignment of several factors. An increased environmental awareness in the profession as well as previous experience contributed. Around the time of the decision, Developer A had attended a reuse workshop which had inspired one of its staff members working on the project. It also had experience of adaptive reuse from previous projects—in contrast to Developer B. Before the reassessment, individuals from Developer A had been sceptical of the scope of demolition and privately thought all buildings

should remain. For these values to become widely accepted in the organisation and for its leadership to halt the scheme, more than environmental awareness or acknowledgements of unique characteristics were required. The decision was prompted by geopolitical changes and subsequent market uncertainty.

This paper argues that times of crisis are an opportunity to divert from conventional practices. The material qualities on the site remain the same throughout the project, but how they are interpreted, framed and valued differ. This reassessment is attributed to the combination of new economic incentives and an opportunity for sustainability. Rather than conforming to preconceived ideals of what an attractive city should be, new conditions can enforce new urban visions and question taken-for-granted attributions of value. The results highlight the importance of professional development and exchange of knowledge for opening new possibilities. The attention from architects, activists and media to reduce the scope of demolition may have played a role in affecting the wider discourse, but their direct role in influencing the reassessment is insignificant. It begs the question whether the decision to retain was founded on authentic motivation or financial self-interest? I would like to argue both. The study shows the premises of the industry's decision-making, what underlying conditions and incentives shape its valuations and how greater adaptive reuse practices require a sustainable business model. Reassessing the site meant simultaneously creating new values, shifting the framing of material qualities. It is an example of valuation as a verb. The decision to retain has put heritage questions into prominence, reframing the buildings' value, rather than starting from preconceived ideas of what they should be. The insertion of new buildings into an existing urban structure has raised questions on the relationship between old and new, and challenged the city to divert from standards required for new developments. Such compromises give rise to new creative solutions and frameshifting practices. While framing can differ amongst professional groups, the project had to resolve these to proceed, even if only based on pragmatism rather than agreement on common values. In this aspect, Alviks strand has served as a lesson and experiment for the city, setting a new standard for what sustainable urban development can be.

Conclusions

This text has not sought to consider whether conversion of existing buildings is possible—previous studies have addressed this—looking instead at motives for retention and values around multiple historic layers in urban development. It matters how material properties are framed and what possibilities they are given. The study shows how external conditions have enforced a reassessment of material properties that places greater value on existing buildings. It shows that material assessment does not only rely on the object's intrinsic properties but on actors' subjective attributions and expectations of what it should be. Demolition has largely been motivated by the perceived production of urban qualities together with underlying economic conditions. As the latter changed, combined with new sustainability motives, practices have emerged that accept the buildings on their terms rather than ideals of what they should be. The study highlights the role of economy in valuing historic layers and shaping urban environments. While interviewees emphasise that reuse is expensive, the research also challenges a myth that it is always cheaper to demolish and build new – instead this depends on the business model. Ultimately, this text has argued that times of crises can open new opportunities for sustainability, enforcing compromises

that challenge conventional practice and result in greater building retention. Alviks strand is a compelling case to follow given the two approaches unfolding at once. It is interesting to consider whether there will be a conflict between retention and urban qualities, and whether the two plots will be disparate or interact as a coherent neighbourhood. The consequence of the built result is for future studies to examine.

Bibliography

- Andersson, Elisabet. "Den hållbara staden – "Vi måste ompröva vad som är fint och fult." *Svenska Dagbladet*. 16 June 2022.
- Boltanski, Luc, and Arnaud Esquerre. *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020.
- Boverket (the Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning). 2023. "Återbruk av byggnader". Accessed December 9 2025. <https://www.boverket.se/sv/byggande/cirkular-ekonomi/cirkulara-byggnader/aterbruk/byggnader/>.
- Boverket (the Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning). 2025. "Cirkulära byggnader". Accessed December 9 2025. <https://www.boverket.se/sv/byggande/cirkular-ekonomi/cirkulara-byggnader/>.
- European Commission. No date. "Construction and demolition waste". Accessed December 9 2025. https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/waste-and-recycling/construction-and-demolition-waste_en.
- Heinich, Nathalie. "A Pragmatic Redefinition of Value(s): Toward a General Model of Valuation". *Theory, Culture & Society* 37 (5), 75–94, 2020.
- House Europe!. 2025. "Yes to renovation! No to demolition". Petition. Accessed December 26 2025. <https://www.houseeurope.eu/157-goal>.
- Lanz, Francesca, and John Pendlebury. "Adaptive Reuse: A Critical Review". *The Journal of Architecture* 27 (2-3), 441–62, 2022.
- Malterre-Barthes, Charlotte. *A Moratorium on New Construction*. London: Sternberg Press. 2025.
- Molnar, Stefan. "Matters of Worth: Practices, Actors and Objects of Valuation in the Design of Urban Space." PhD diss., Chalmers University of Technology, 2024.
- Metzger, Jonathan, and Sofia Wiberg. "Contested Framings of Urban Qualities: Dis/Qualifications of Value in Urban Development Controversies". *Urban Studies* 55 (10), 2300–2316, 2018.
- Thörn, Catharina, and Helena Holgersson. "Gentrifiering – kultur, politik och ekonomi." In *Gentrifiering*, edited by Catharina Thörn and Helena Holgersson, 11–34. 1st ed. Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2014.
- Tunström, Moa, and Karin Bradley. "Opposing the Postpolitical Swedish Urban Discourse." In *Planning against the Political: Democratic Deficits in European Territorial Governance*, 69–84. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014.
- United Nations Environment Programme. Building Materials and the Climate: Constructing a New Future. Nairobi: UNEP, 2023. <https://wedocs.unep.org/20.500.11822/43293>.
- Vatin, François. "Valuation As Evaluating and Valorizing". *Valuation Studies* 1 (1), 31–50, 2013.