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GOAL: TO EXTEND THE LIFE OF BUILDINGS

Municipalities and communities have a well-stocked toolkit to facilitate the reuse and repurposing of their built heritage. The ball is now in their court!

The most sustainable building is one that is already built. Which is good, because the downtown neighbourhoods in most mid-sized municipalities are full of aging buildings that need to be maintained, transformed and renovated rather than demolished. For municipalities and communities, extending the life of this built heritage has several benefits, particularly in terms of sustainable land use planning. It is up to them to create the ideal conditions for encouraging renovation projects and thus maximize the potential for reusing and repurposing existing buildings.

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The case of Trois-Rivières, the ninth most populous city in Quebec, is particularly interesting in this regard. Its situation is similar to those of many other moderately sized cities in Quebec: rapid urban expansion coupled with the desire to preserve its built heritage. Located near the St. Lawrence River, the city has experienced several growth stages throughout its history that have shaped it in a rather distinctive way. Trois-Rivières is therefore an ideal test area for looking at the reuse of buildings.

An analysis of some 5,500 work authorization applications in downtown Trois-Rivières between 2016 and 2022 confirms the potential of this approach. Partial or minor renovations account for 82% of authorized projects. In addition, more than three out of four projects had an estimated cost of less than \$50,000 each, so they can be classified as minor. But the data doesn't tell us what happened once the authorizations were issued, because Ville de Trois-Rivières doesn't compile that information. So the research team conducted 19 case studies to find out.



DEMYSTIFYING REUSE

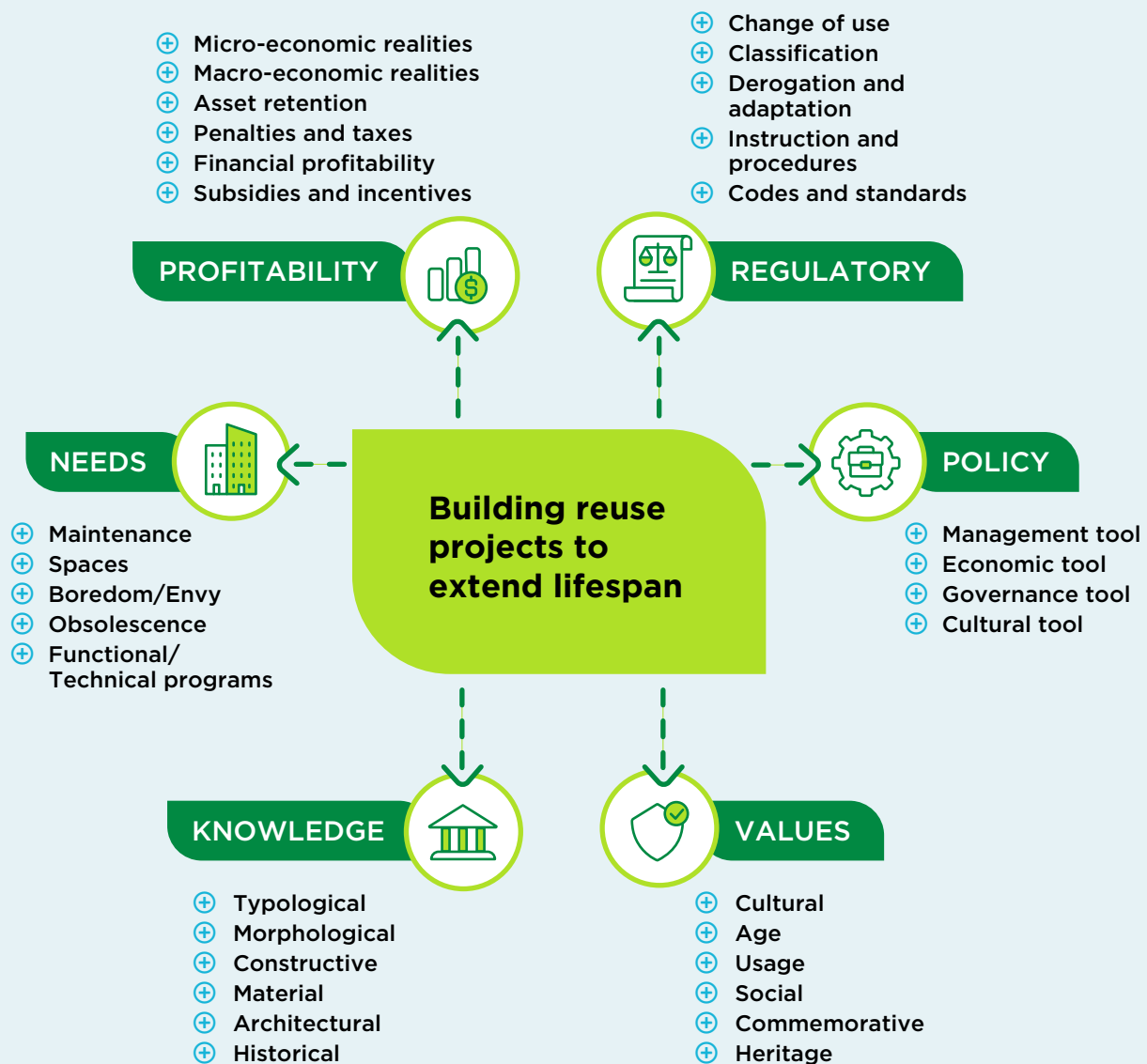
Their research brought to light a number of issues that are barriers to extending the life of built heritage. Among the issues raised were the rigidity of regulatory frameworks, which are more often tailored to new construction rather than renovation, and the relative indifference of governments to the quality of the work. These issues are a big factor in the decision-making process of the various stakeholders involved in renovation projects: owners, construction professionals, elected officials and employees of municipalities and communities.

“Project proponents often don’t understand what it means to reuse buildings,” said Pier-Luc Lussier, project manager for Entremise, a social- and solidarity-economy development company. “The value of this work is enormous,” he added. In collaboration with researchers at Université Laval, the Entremise team has developed reuse recommendations for municipalities and communities. According to Pier-Luc Lussier, “It’s wrong to say that repurposing costs more and that it’s always better to take buildings down. The same goes for the complexity argument—with a little will power, it’s quite possible to adapt an existing building.”

These misconceptions are based on a very narrow vision of heritage, which goes beyond the simple fact that a building was built a long time ago. “We are not very good at measuring the symbolic value of buildings,” explained Pier-Luc Lussier. “Expanding this concept is the key to modernizing it.”

It is also a great way to reinforce a collective culture of preserving and maintaining buildings. “You protect what you know and care about,” he said. Informing people and raising public awareness about these issues, for example through public consultations, establishes a first line of defence for our built heritage.

Summary of the challenges involved in reusing buildings and extending their lifespan.



USING WHAT'S THERE

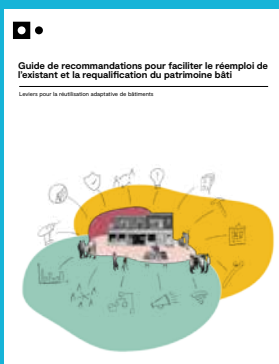
It's also a good idea for municipalities and communities to conduct heritage and characterization studies to learn more about their territory. In Quebec, they are even required to draw up an inventory of their built heritage by 2026. Having a better understanding of the context in which projects will be carried out sets the stage for a host of other measures, such as preventing buildings from standing empty for long periods, which can be harmful in many ways. "To stop buildings from deteriorating, someone has to keep an eye on them," said Pier-Luc Lussier. Keeping a register of vacant buildings is one way to do it.

Renovation regulations are important but can be daunting. It's therefore better to provide clear guidelines, such as documents that explain the basic principles for renovation permit applications or fact sheets that explain

best renovation practices. Municipalities and communities also have a crucial role to play in funding these projects. "Regional county municipalities (RCMs) are valuable allies in identifying all sources of government support," added Pier-Luc Lussier.

Assessing the environmental cost of a demolition and reconstruction project may be the best way to reignite interest in renovation. "Reuse saves the energy to extract new materials and on waste and residue sent to landfills," said Pier-Luc Lussier. "This reduces greenhouse gas emissions compared to new construction." Taxing the amount of waste generated on a construction site and increasing the cost of a tonne of landfill should be a no-brainer for municipalities and communities that care about their built heritage.

Steps municipalities can take



To encourage the reuse of existing buildings and the repurposing of built heritage, municipalities can draw on the recommendations laid out in the guide, [Guide d'Entremise](#) (only available in French). Here are three key suggestions:

1. Expand the concept of heritage to better protect the built environment
2. Maintain a register of vacant buildings
3. Develop context-specific building demolition regulations

See the guide for more details and useful tools.