

# **The Finnish Urban Studies Conference 2026 - Session 16**

## **Survival Stories from the Finnish Built Environment**

### **1. The National Fabric and the Places We Are Losing**

**Siiri Turpeinen**

Urban studies in Finland operates with a geography that does not fully reflect Finnish spatial reality. Most of Finland's land, building stock, natural resources, and a significant share of its permanent population exist outside densely populated centres. Applying an urban-centric analytical frame to a country fundamentally characterised by distributed, low-density settlement produces incomplete conclusions about circular economy, demographic resilience, territorial governance, and whose futures are considered worth planning for.

This presentation argues that Finland is experiencing a structural failure manifesting across multiple domains simultaneously: the treatment of dense urban nodes and sparsely populated distributed territory as competing realities rather than interdependent components of one national system. Drawing on demographic data, policy analysis, and observations from Finnish rural municipalities, the presentation examines how distributed building stock declines through a structural market failure combining private ownership, capital exclusion, and service withdrawal — a process compounding into the holistic wellbeing and future confidence of the people who stay.

The dominant framing of buildings in sparsely populated areas as liabilities is not neutral; it systematically excludes the social, cultural, circular economy, and territorial resilience value these structures carry. When these excluded values are restored to the analysis, the same buildings become visible as spatial preconditions for community formation, migration integration, local resource loops, and distributed national resilience.

The presentation proposes a dual-reality model — dense and distributed as equally necessary components of one system — and argues that seeing Finland whole is the structural precondition for building a society that works for everyone in it.

### **2. From Historic Preservation to Recycling – Fallacies and Arguments for Demolition**

**Kaarin Taipale**

The principles of historic preservation were agreed upon in the Charter of Venice (1964). It was understood that the built environment retells the story of places and peoples. It has not been necessary to fight for the preservation of the home of Runeberg, the Finnish national poet. However, if the preservation of, for example, an anonymous industrial building or a construction method typical of a certain period is debated, the argumentation becomes more complicated. Officially, it is not appropriate to argue for demolition on the grounds that a building is “ugly” or that “in order for the project to be profitable we need a bigger volume.” But it has been acceptable to say that “it is beyond repair” or that “there are health concerns.” This is why wooden window frames deemed “beyond repair” have been replaced by plastic frames that cannot be repaired at all.

An idealized past needs historic preservation as proof. At the same time, social shame about an impoverished or politically denounced past may sometimes provide a silent argument in favor of

demolition. This argument, of course, coincides with the financial expectations of real estate investors. It was easy to argue for the total demolition of mass-produced neighborhoods in former East Germany in order to produce more livable, modern homes for people—but definitely not for the old inhabitants. When the neighborhoods were sold to investors, no one bothered to consider that, simultaneously with the buildings, the existing human communities were demolished. The “Ossis” were uprooted. There are contrasting examples, too. One of the best known may be the renovation project designed by Lacaton & Vassal, where the inhabitants could remain in their apartments during the renovation period.

Sustainable development goals brought the demand for energy efficiency onto the agendas of construction and building maintenance. Now we are aware of the huge volume of building waste, and there are circular economy targets for the reuse of construction materials—but not for buildings themselves. Alongside these targets, we need to consider the social and community-building impacts of demolition, whether we are talking about urban landmarks or the identity of neighborhoods.

Not surprisingly, in the lingo of consulting companies even sustainable development goals can be turned into arguments for demolition. In the heart of Helsinki, at Mannerheimintie 14, “the top-quality Signe, which fulfills the highest sustainable construction criteria, is going to replace the existing office building, which has reached the end of its lifecycle.”

What if legislation, as a rule, banned demolition and allowed new construction only in cases where no existing structure could be converted to fulfill new functional requirements? What if the office building at Mannerheimintie 14 were not torn down but instead its HVAC system were renewed? What if, following a number of brilliant international examples, our architecture and design museum settled in an existing building? In that case, one of the most iconic urban spaces in Helsinki—the South Harbor—would remain open and could be revitalized as a waterfront promenade. Or, as one of the purchased competition entries suggested, what if only recycled construction materials were used for the new museum?

### **3. Nordic Survival Stories - Lessons from the Swedish, Norwegian, and Finnish Demolition Atlases**

#### **ACAN Finland, Sweden & Norway**

The Architects Climate Action Network (ACAN) is an international grassroots movement advocating for systemic change in the built environment in response to the climate crisis. Across several national chapters—including those in Sweden, Norway, and Finland—a central theme has emerged around the widespread demolition of existing buildings.

Inspired by the Swiss-German Abrissatlas, ACAN Sweden launched its own demolition atlas, which has since grown to parallel initiatives in Norway and Finland. These national demolition atlases serve as visualizations of the scale of demolition, to make it visible to the public, and stimulate discussion on more sustainable alternatives.

In 2025, ACAN Sweden, Norway, and Finland received support from the Nordic Culture Point to strengthen their collaboration in their mission to oppose demolition and promote rehabilitation. The ACAN Nordic Demolition campaign brings together the three ACAN groups in a total of three meetings and seminars to develop the network’s shared strategies with a focus on future demolition campaigns. The second meeting will take place in Finland in spring 2026.

This presentation—held by representatives of the three Nordic ACAN chapters—introduces the groups and their demolition atlases. The main purpose is to present stories of buildings in Sweden, Norway, and Finland that avoided demolition. These survival stories provide insights into mechanisms and decision making that enabled their retention. The presentation seeks to identify transferable lessons that may support the protection and continued use of existing buildings amid ongoing demolition pressures.

#### **4. The Shortwave Radio Station of Pori as Cultural Heritage**

##### **Niilo Rinne**

In eastern Pori, in the middle of a forested area, a shortwave radio station responsible for National Broadcasting Company Yle's international broadcasts operated from 1939 until 1987. After the radio activities of the functionalist station came to an end, the building passed into the ownership of the city. Over the years, the old station and its surroundings have provided a setting for a wide variety of local activities, and today particularly for visual arts and underground culture through the Artists' Association T.E.H.D.A.S. ry and the Pori Electronic Music Association Plugi. The fascinating and historically significant, yet deteriorating building, combined with contemporary art and electronic music in the middle of a park area, offers a truly exceptional experience. In my presentation, I will talk about how all of this has come to be, and everything that has been done to preserve this building and its cultural activities.

#### **5. Beyond Survival: Governance Practices and Urban Vibrancy in Repurposed Industrial Heritage Sites**

##### **Ilona Hiila**

Repurposed industrial heritage sites have become central to Western urban regeneration strategies, yet saving these spaces from demolition is only the beginning. Despite the investment and expectations, we still lack a holistic view on how vibrancy is produced and sustained within these spaces.

Much of the scholarship seeking to explain this focuses on policies, land use decisions and architectural interventions — treating vibrancy as an end-result of built environment form. However, there remains a gap to understand why some transformed spaces evolve into sustained hubs of social and economic activity, while others with comparable spatial configurations stagnate. This raises a fundamental question: how is vibrancy formed and sustained?

This presentation answers that question by conceptualising vibrancy as a mechanism-driven process enacted through the agency of cultural and hospitality entrepreneurs. It analyses how governance practices condition the activation of these mechanisms, drawing on critical realism and Roy Bhaskar's four planar model of social being.

The research applies a qualitative comparative case study in two repurposed industrial heritage sites in Helsinki — Teurastamo and Konepaja — whose differing governance arrangements reveal that physical survival alone does not determine whether a repurposed space becomes vibrant. The presentation will show that what matters is how governance is enacted in practice: how physical settings are maintained, how access to space is organised, how transparent decision-making is, how collaboration is facilitated and how long-term commitment is signalled. These everyday practices condition whether entrepreneurs are willing to commit, collaborate and invest in ways that sustain vibrancy over time.