Faster Housing, Lower Carbon, Better Value

CAHP | ACECP

Briefing Note 01

Retrofit is a climate policy and a housing policy.

Retaining existing buildings avoids the emissions associated with demolition, new material extraction, and construction while offering equivalent cost efficiencies and faster project timelines that can accelerate housing delivery and improve affordability.

Canada's existing building stock represents a major opportunity to advance housing supply, climate action, and economic development simultaneously. Federal and provincial governments play a critical role in enabling this shift by implementing retrofit-first policies, aligning housing and climate programs, and reducing barriers by integrating whole-life carbon considerations into national building codes and funding frameworks.

A typical rental residential unit at 1660 Hollis Street, Halifax (Unlocking the Value of Existing Buildings, Case Study 1), a former mid-century office building transformed into lofts.

Excerpts from Unlocking the Value of Existing Buildings. This briefing note is part of a series summarizing key insights from *Unlocking the Value of Existing Buildings: a new approach to codes for carbon, culture and cost.*
The full report is available here: cahp-acecp.ca/learning-resources/

Call to Action for Federal and Provincial Governments

Integrate Retrofits and Reuse into the Housing Strategy

- Retrofit and adaptive reuse can accelerate project timelines by avoiding demolition and major structural reconstruction and bring housing to market faster than typical new construction.
- Making retrofit and reuse a component of Canada's housing strategy recognizes existing and heritage buildings as essential assets in addressing housing supply.

Introduce Policies in Support of Retrofit

- Outdated building and energy codes designed primarily for new construction make building reuse unnecessarily complex and create barriers to conserving existing assets.
- National building and energy codes currently emphasize operational energy performance. Incorporating whole-life carbon considerations into code frameworks would allow decision-makers to evaluate the full carbon picture when weighing the value of retrofit against the value of replacement.
- Federal and provincial governments should support the development and adoption of updated policies and building codes that enable the reuse of existing buildings, such as performance-based compliance pathways for building and energy codes.

Recognize Retrofit as an Effective Cost and Carbon Strategy

- Policies that support adaptive reuse deliver both economic and environmental benefits. By retaining existing structures and building components, carbon emissions associated with demolition and new material production are avoided.
- Retrofit projects can reduce capital costs by leveraging existing building assets and shortening construction timelines, while focusing investment on targeted upgrades and new uses.

Strengthen Local Economies and Skilled Trades

- Retrofit and building conservation projects create employment in construction, engineering, and specialized trades.
- Adaptive Reuse can stimulate regional economic activity, drive demand for made-in-Canada materials and support workforce development in emerging low-carbon construction practices.
- Invest in training programs that expand expertise in envelope diagnostics, electrification, conservation, and heritage craft trades to build the workforce capacity needed to deliver retrofit at scale.

This project is funded by Natural Resources Canada's Code Acceleration Fund:

Natural Resources Canada | Ressources naturelles Canada