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More Than Just Insulation: A Holistic Approach to Energy Efficiency in  
Historic Buildings

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## More Than Just Insulation: A Holistic Approach to Energy Efficiency in Historic Buildings

Private owners of historic houses as a group are often overlooked, even though they represent a significant share of Europe's built heritage—both in number and in scale. That alone makes them essential players in the move toward more sustainable heritage. The European pilot project CliP ComE supports them through a free three-day training that builds knowledge and confidence. The

programme promotes smart maintenance, practical solutions, and long-term energy efficiency. This article features an interview with project initiator Gerald Wagenhofer.

 EDITOR · APRIL 25, 2025 ·



Editor



**T**he transition to a more sustainable built environment is high on the European agenda. Historic buildings – from castles and manor houses to entire old town centres – are not exempt from this challenge. In fact, they offer unique opportunities.

### ***CliP-ComE***

This year, a new European initiative titled “CliP ComE” (Climate Protection Competences for European Historic Houses) will be launched as a pilot to help private owners of historic houses make their buildings more sustainable.

Developed by a consortium of five organisations including the Burghauptmannschaft Österreich (BHö), the European Historic Houses Association (EHH), and the Dutch Institute for Heritage and Marketing (IVEM), the initiative consists of a three-day training offered in Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands, and introduces the role of the “Climate Protection Guard”—a national contact point for tailored advice on sustainable renovation and EU regulations.

Its goal is to strengthen the capacity of private owners of castles, estates, manor houses, country residences, and palaces to make their buildings more energy efficient and climate-resilient. In this article, project initiator and leader Gerald Wagenhofer explains why training, shared standards, and cooperation across borders are essential to making Europe’s built heritage fit for the future.

The **European Historic Houses Association** represents 27 national associations of private historic houses. Based in Brussels, it advocates for the preservation of Europe’s unique privately owned cultural heritage. Representing over 50,000 properties, it supports owners in keeping these monuments alive. Through partnerships, policy work, and campaigns, it highlights their cultural value—protecting not just buildings, but also the stories and traditions that come with them.

### ***The hidden efficiency of historic buildings***

When thinking of heritage homes like castles, country houses, and villas, sustainability is not the first thing that comes to mind. Yet many of these buildings were designed with the indoor climate in mind, using traditional techniques and natural materials that regulate temperature and moisture naturally.

“When properly maintained, historic buildings often perform much better than we give them credit for,” Wagenhofer explains. For instance, traditional double windows, with multiple panes of glass and wide air gaps, are often removed because they underperform on paper. “But in practice, these old windows – when maintained – can be just as effective as modern ones, while retaining their historical and aesthetic value.”

This misconception often leads to unnecessary renovations. “The belief that ‘new is better’ is deeply ingrained,” says Wagenhofer. “But simply keeping a building in good condition can often be more effective – and cheaper – than invasive upgrades.”

### ***Why maintenance is overlooked***

A major obstacle, according to Wagenhofer, is that tax and financial incentives are

skewed. Large renovation projects are easier to classify as investments and therefore more financially attractive to private owners. Routine maintenance, by contrast, is undervalued and often postponed. This situation is common in many European countries, making it a widespread structural issue that hampers the long-term sustainability of historic buildings.

This imbalance means essential small-scale repairs are neglected, even though they contribute significantly to energy efficiency and preservation.

“Private owners often have too little incentive to invest in good maintenance,” Wagenhofer notes. “This needs to change.”

### ***Solving problems at the source***

Wagenhofer stresses that energy efficiency should be approached holistically. “Too often we treat the symptoms, not the causes,” he says. Moisture problems, for example, are frequently addressed by adding insulation or ventilation. “But if you don’t understand why the moisture is there, you risk creating new problems.”

***Wagenhofer: “We need to break the reflex that old automatically means inefficient.”***

Many damp issues are caused by changing groundwater levels or poor drainage. “The first step should always be to identify the source. Maybe it’s the surrounding terrain, or water management around the building. Only then can you propose the right solutions.”

“We need to look at the building and its environment as a whole,” he adds.

“Everything is connected: soil, rainfall patterns, drainage systems.”

### ***Craftsmanship saves money***

Wagenhofer illustrates the value of expertise with a past project. A property owner wanted to restore a rotunda in their historic garden and, based on the advice of an architect with little heritage experience, had set aside one million euros for the work. “But when we reviewed the plans, we were shocked. Our experts estimated it would cost just €300,000 to €400,000.”

The architect had included structural reinforcements based purely on assumptions. “He just assumed the structure was unsound, and proposed costly and unnecessary measures.”

“If you have the right knowledge and experience,” Wagenhofer says, “you can carry out these projects for a fraction of the price.”

This is true across the board. “I’m not against new technologies,” he adds. “But they should be applied with a deep understanding of building physics. And that’s where it often goes wrong: we simply lack specialists.”

To address this shortage, Wagenhofer started training craftspeople in Austria in 2013. This initiative led to the creation of the European Heritage Academy, which now trains a new generation of professionals in heritage, sustainability, and technology.

### ***Reaching private owners***

Private owners are often isolated from heritage networks, which typically serve to facilitate knowledge sharing, foster professional growth, and represent collective interests. “They are more difficult to reach than, for example, church or public property owners because they are usually not connected to formal organisations or networks involved in heritage,” Wagenhofer explains. “As a result, they lack direct contact with governmental bodies and research institutions, which limits their access to essential information, funding opportunities, and practical expertise needed to care for their buildings effectively and affordably.”

The CliP ComE training was launched with EU support as a standalone pilot initiative, separate from the European Heritage Academy. It consists of a three-day programme designed to offer short, accessible, and practical training to private owners. Restoration professionals and energy consultants are also welcome.

By offering the training free of charge, a key barrier is removed. Participants also receive a European ECQA-certificate, which builds trust among owners, advisors,

and craftspeople. “Shared standards are essential for affordable, high-quality heritage preservation,” says Wagenhofer.

### ***Preparing for climate change***

With climate change accelerating, heritage buildings must become not just energy-efficient, but climate-resilient. “Historic houses must be ready for drought, floods, and more frequent extreme weather,” Wagenhofer argues.

CliP ComE addresses this with a practical focus. A key concept within CliP-ComE is the “Climate Protection Guard”: a trained expert appointed in each participating country to serve as the central point of contact for private owners.

These experts advise on sustainable renovation, help interpret EU-regulations, and identify support schemes. Their role is to bridge the gap between EU policy and local realities, providing tailored, up-to-date guidance in a fast-evolving regulatory landscape.

Most EU legislation, including the key Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (EPBD), is transposed into national law. While the EPBD sets ambitious goals, it also allows exemptions for historic buildings—a crucial nuance. Owners must be well informed about such exceptions and supported in finding customised solutions that enhance energy performance while respecting heritage values. Ongoing developments like the Green Deal and Fit for 55 make staying informed essential.

Many owners find it difficult to navigate this complexity. Wagenhofer therefore argues that each country should appoint a dedicated Climate Protection Guard.

“The Climate Guard bridges the gap between policy and day-to-day reality. With better guidance, owners can anticipate climate risks and access funding opportunities.”

### ***European knowledge sharing***

One of CliP ComE’s great strengths is its international scope. “Most heritage professionals face similar challenges, no matter the country,” says Wagenhofer. This makes cross-border knowledge sharing very helpful.

However, there is a need to tailor this knowledge to local conditions. The training currently focuses on general principles, but participants also need guidance on

national regulations, working with authorities, and understanding country-specific tax and funding schemes.

By developing a shared curriculum and delivering it across multiple countries, a common quality level is emerging. The European certificate underlines this standard.

“Cooperation and knowledge sharing are vital,” Wagenhofer concludes. “That’s how we make heritage management affordable, sustainable, and future-ready.”

## **Towards a More Resilient Heritage Sector**

The path to a climate-ready, energy-efficient heritage sector starts with better knowledge and stronger collaboration. CliP-ComE sets the tone for a new generation of informed, empowered private owners. By combining practical training, European cooperation, and shared standards, this initiative aims not just to preserve the past, but to shape a resilient future for heritage across Europe.

Gerald Wagenhofer is the founder and Managing Director of UBW Unternehmensberatung Wagenhofer GmbH, a management consultancy based in Vienna, Austria. He serves as Training Manager at the European Heritage Academy, an initiative established by the Burghauptmannschaft Österreich (BHÖ) and the Austrian Federal Monuments Office (BDA). Additionally, he collaborates closely with BHÖ on various European heritage projects.

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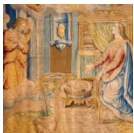


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