

2025
HELSINKI
STUDY TOUR
Backgrounder



Helsinki

THE FUNCTIONAL CITY

Helsinki strives to be recognized as “the most functional city in the world,” a vision stemming from a belief that urban life should seamlessly support residents’ needs and aspirations.

A key ingredient in Helsinki’s quest for functionality is its emphasis on **human-centered design** across all municipal services. Historically influenced by functionalist urban planning principle prioritizing well-organized districts and robust public transport, the city has evolved to embrace community engagement and flexible, adaptable spaces. At its core, functionality in Helsinki means designing public services, infrastructure, and governance so efficiently that residents can navigate daily life with minimal friction.

High levels of **social and institutional trust** form the bedrock of Helsinki’s functionality. In Helsinki, this culture of trust flourishes through open governance and data, engaged citizens, and consistent and fair administration.

WORLD HAPPINESS INDEX: EASING THE EVERYDAY

Helsinki consistently plays a substantial role in Finland’s high ranking in the World Happiness Report, demonstrating that functionality and trust directly support well-being. Key contributors include:

- **Extensive Social Support:** Universal healthcare, free or affordable education, and safety nets like unemployment benefits ease residents’ financial stresses.
- **Work-Life Balance:** Reasonable working hours, strong employee protections, and abundant green spaces for outdoor recreation let citizens maintain a healthy pace of life.
- **Community Interaction:** The design of public squares, libraries, and city events promote interpersonal connections, combatting isolation and reinforcing social bonds.

Together, these factors free people from many daily worries, enabling them to invest in personal development, family time, and community engagement—driving Helsinki’s consistently high happiness scores.

Helsinki’s commitment to inclusivity and shared prosperity also help keep its [Gini coefficient](#) low relative to global averages (27.7%, 2021). Key mechanisms include:

- **Mixed-Income Housing Policies:** Mandatory social housing quotas in new developments ensure that neighborhoods remain diverse and affordable.
- **Progressive Taxation & Welfare:** Finland’s progressive tax structure funds extensive social programs, lifting up lower-income groups and limiting the wealth gap.
- **Robust Public Services:** Well-funded education, healthcare, and social care systems reduce out-of-pocket expenses and promote upward mobility, ensuring that economic inequalities do not translate into unequal life chances.

While no large city is wholly immune to economic disparity, Helsinki continues to invest in policies that mitigate inequality, thereby sustaining a broad middle class and a cohesive social fabric.

Sources:

- [Helsinki City Strategy 2021-2025: A Place of Growth](#)
- [Transparency International – 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index](#)
- [Helsinki Region Infoshare - Open data service](#)
- [World Happiness Report 2024](#)
- [World Bank Open Data: Gini index](#)

HELSINKI’S PARTICIPATION IN THE WHO EUROPEAN HEALTHY CITIES NETWORK

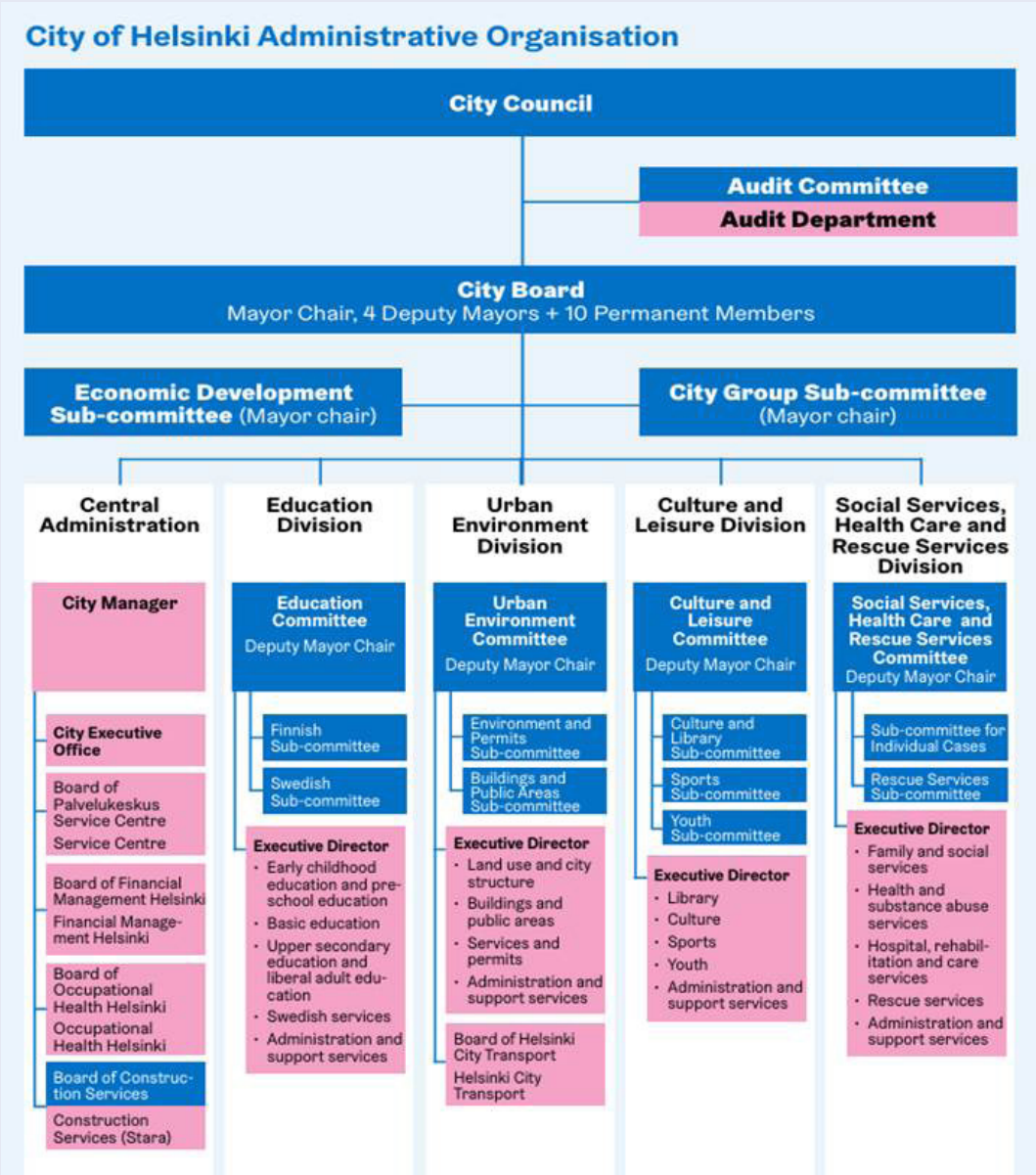
Helsinki is a member of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network, collaborating with approximately 80 cities to promote health, well-being, and sustainable development at the local level. As part of the network, Helsinki shares good practices internationally, strengthens cross-city cooperation, and works to reduce health and welfare disparities. The city’s Healthy Cities work is coordinated by the City Executive Office’s Strategy Department and implemented across different municipal divisions through a cross-sectoral approach. Helsinki’s efforts focus on promoting the accessibility of green areas, expanding Culture Kids activities, supporting positive action models, advancing memory-friendly city initiatives, and strengthening work for the mental well-being of children and young people. These actions are designed to build effective models for welfare and health promotion throughout the city.

Source: [European Healthy Cities Network](#) | [Health and welfare promotion](#) | [City of Helsinki](#)

I. Governance

Below is an overview of how Helsinki organizes municipal governance, handles healthcare reform through newly established wellbeing services counties, and manages various levels of planning.

HELSINKI CITY ORGANIZATION



The **Mayor** chairs the City Board and provides overall leadership for city administration while each of the City's four main administrative divisions (Education, Urban Environment, Culture and Leisure, and Social Services, Health Care & Rescue Services) is supervised by a **Deputy Mayor**. The **Executive Directors** are responsible for day-to-day operations within each division, ensuring policies align with citywide goals and regulations.

HEALTHCARE REFORM & WELLBEING SERVICES COUNTIES

In 2021, Finland undertook a significant reform of its social and healthcare services, **21 new wellbeing services counties** were created to streamline and equalize access to health, social, and rescue services across the country. Wellbeing counties, in general, are organized and funded by the central government. In Helsinki, the central government funds these services while the City organizes and manages service provision. By maintaining autonomy outside the new wellbeing county system, Helsinki continues to tailor its social and healthcare policies directly to local needs, aligning with the city's broader commitment to efficient, resident-focused services.

Source: [Government of Finland: Government proposal for health and social services reform and related legislation adopted by Parliament](#)

DIFFERENT LEVELS OF PLANNING AND PROCESS



National Level Legislation

At the national level, the **Land Use and Building Act** sets broad requirements for zoning, building codes, and environmental considerations. The **National Land Use Guidelines**, set by the **Council of State**, act as overarching principles that guide land use at all levels. They address nationally significant issues, such as sustainable transportation, climate adaptation, renewable energy, and the preservation of cultural and natural heritage. National guidelines inform **Regional Land Use Plans**, ensuring alignment with broader objectives like Finland's commitment to carbon neutrality.

Regional Level Collaboration and Coordination

Regional land use planning is a cornerstone of Finland's spatial planning framework, serving as a vital link between national land use guidelines and municipal planning. Overseen by **Regional Councils**, these plans convert national priorities into medium- and long-term strategies tailored to the unique needs of each region. Regional plans provide legally binding frameworks that guide Local Master Plans and Local Detailed Plans, ensuring alignment with overarching objectives.

The Helsinki-Uusimaa Region is the most populous and economically significant area in Finland, housing 1.8 million residents (31% of the national population) across 26 municipalities, including Helsinki. The **Helsinki-Uusimaa Regional Council** serves as the key governing authority for regional planning and development in the capital region. The council coordinates regional land use, economic development, and transport, ensuring that major projects—like rail expansion—are consistent across municipal boundaries.

Read more about the [Helsinki-Uusimaa Regional Land Use Plan 2050 \(PDF\)](#) and the [Well Ahead – Helsinki-Uusimaa Regional Programme 2022–2025 \(PDF\)](#)

Municipal Level Planning in Finland and Helsinki

Municipal planning in Helsinki is shaped by two complementary pillars: the [Master Plan 2016](#) and the [City Strategy 2021–2025](#). Together, these documents ensure that Helsinki balances short-term priorities with long-term growth objectives. These plans are interlinked: while the City Strategy sets actionable policies and short-term priorities, the Master Plan establishes the physical framework to implement these goals, ensuring local actions align with the legally mandated regional and national sustainability objectives.

- **Master Plan 2016:** A legally binding spatial planning blueprint that shapes Helsinki’s urban structure through 2050. This plan, required to align with the **Helsinki-Uusimaa Regional Land Use Plan**, ensures municipal land use decisions comply with regional guidelines. It emphasizes compact, rail-connected growth, preservation of green spaces, and integration of mixed-use developments to foster vibrant urban centers.
- **City Strategy 2021–2025:** A governance-focused document addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges over a **four-year council term**. Key priorities include achieving carbon neutrality by 2030, fostering equality, and enhancing accessibility through citizen-focused services.

Policy Tool

MAL Agreements are joint commitments between the national government, the Helsinki Region, and municipalities to align **land use** (maankäyttö), **housing** (asuminen), and **transport** (liikenne) policies. MAL agreements facilitate balanced development, encouraging higher-density housing near transit and ensuring that new infrastructure investments match regional growth objectives.

Sources:

- Ministry of Environment: [Land Use and Building Act](#), [Land Use Planning](#), [Government decision on Finland’s national land use guidelines \(PDF\)](#)
- City of Helsinki: [City Plan 2016](#), [Helsinki City Strategy 2021—2025: A Place of Growth](#), [Planning Process](#)
- [Helsinki-Uusimaa Regional Council](#)
- [What is a Regional Land Use Plan \(PDF\)](#)

DESIGN IN MUNICIPAL PLANNING: HELSINKI’S APPROACH AND LESSONS

Helsinki has emerged as a global leader in using design thinking to shape municipal governance, urban development, and public services. Over the past decade, the city has introduced new leadership roles, adopted user-centric methods, and encouraged wide-ranging experimentation, making design a core tenet of how Helsinki operates.



Ethos of Design in City Planning

Helsinki’s emphasis on design thinking gained momentum in 2012 when the city served as World Design Capital. Rather than focusing on aesthetics alone, the event recast design as a powerful tool for solving municipal challenges. Today, design is woven into citywide decision-making, from how Helsinki plans its neighborhoods to how it delivers everyday services. Helsinki treats design as a **people-centered** process. City officials begin new initiatives by consulting residents—through interviews, workshops, and online platforms—to identify genuine needs. Solutions are then prototyped and refined with user feedback. Rather than imposing top-down policies, the city systematically works with its citizens, believing that a collaborative model yields outcomes better aligned with real-world conditions. This co-creative mindset makes Helsinki’s approach to design notably different from that of many other cities, where design might be siloed within architecture or marketing departments.

Chief Design Officer

Helsinki solidified its design ethos by creating a **Chief Design Officer (CDO)** position—the first of its kind in Europe. This high-level role ensures that user-oriented thinking underpins municipal operations and that innovations in one department are shared across the entire administration. The CDO champions **service design**, **participatory processes**, and continual improvement of public offerings.

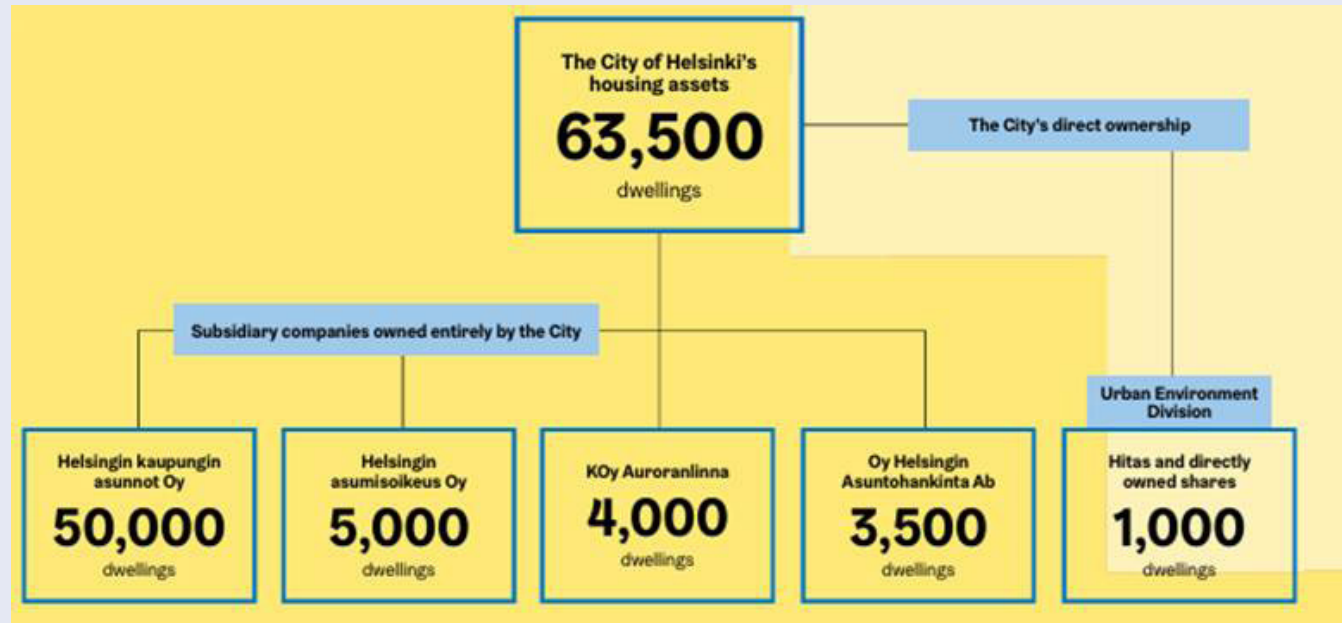
Sources:

- [Design Helsinki](#)
- [City of Helsinki increases the number of design activities – design is a proactive reaction to future challenges](#)
- [Effectiveness of design activities at the City of Helsinki](#) (A joint project between the Department of Design of Aalto University’s School of Art, Design and Architecture and City of Helsinki)

II. Housing

The City of Helsinki owns around 63,500 dwellings, reflecting its far-reaching role in ensuring housing affordability and social inclusivity. Over the years, this comprehensive governance structure has evolved through the establishment and consolidation of municipal housing companies as well as the city's own development arm—often referred to as the **Housing Production Service** (ATT).

By leveraging substantial land holdings—**nearly two-thirds of Helsinki's territory**—the city directs development, balances tenure types, and maintains affordability in both new and renovated neighborhoods. In line with its broader housing strategy, Helsinki aims to produce 7,000–8,000 new dwellings annually, with ATT playing a key role in meeting these targets.



HISTORICAL CONTEXT & POLICY FRAMEWORK

- **Arava System (Post-WWII):** Introduced in 1949 to address severe housing shortages, providing low-interest, state-subsidized loans. Spurred rapid suburban expansion and the construction of large-scale affordable units.
- **Social Mixing (1970s–1980s):** As Helsinki modernized, it blended different housing tenures—rental, owner-occupied, right-of-occupancy—to avoid the emergence of homogenous, segregated districts.
- **Hitas System (1978):** Price-regulated homeownership to keep apartments affordable and encourage a stable, mixed population.
- **Ongoing Reform (1990s–Present):** Economic challenges pushed Helsinki to refine and expand its affordability measures—such as updated Hitas rules—while continuing to prioritize integration and socio-economic diversity.

CITY-OWNED HOUSING COMPANIES

Helsinki's strong municipal footprint in housing enables direct control over affordability and quality. Key entities include:

1. **Helsingin kaupungin asunnot Oy (Heka):** They manage approximately 50,000 state-subsidized rental apartments.
2. **Helsingin Asumisoikeus Oy (HASO):** They manage about 5,000 right-of-occupancy dwellings, a hybrid model between renting and owning.
3. **Kiinteistö Oy Auroranlinna:** They own and manage around 6,000 affordable rental dwellings.
4. **Hitas (City-Regulated Ownership):** They keep sale prices below market rates to expand homeownership opportunities.

III. Active Transportation

Helsinki stands as a global leader in active transportation (AT), achieving remarkable success despite facing significant challenges. In 2013, the city achieved an active transportation mode share of 77%, placing it among an exclusive group of cities with populations exceeding 500,000 and an AT mode share of over 75%.

CYCLING PLAN

Helsinki’s commitment to cycling is rooted in broader objectives to reduce carbon emissions, enhance quality of life, and encourage more sustainable transport modes. Although the city’s population density (around 1,800 people per km²) is closer to many North American cities—where car dependence is common—Helsinki decided decades ago to support transit, walking, and cycling as pillars of livability.

2020 Action Plan

The 2020 Action Plan highlighted several barriers to increasing cycling’s modal share in Helsinki:

- **Stagnant Modal Share:** Despite earlier investments, cycling’s modal share remained around 9–11%, falling short of the 15% target set for 2020.
- **Incomplete Cycling Network:** Only 29 km of the 131 km target network had been completed, leading to fragmented, disconnected routes that discourage regular cycling.
- **Worksite Disruptions:** Temporary traffic arrangements during construction projects were often inadequate, reducing route accessibility and compromising safety.
- **Seasonal Barriers:** Inconsistent winter maintenance limited year-round cycling, with snowfall and poor conditions deterring riders.
- **Resource Constraints:** Helsinki had fewer dedicated staff and resources for cycling infrastructure compared to leading European cities like Copenhagen and Amsterdam.
- **Weak Interdepartmental Commitment:** Some city units did not view cycling as part of their core responsibilities, leading to uneven implementation.

Bicycle Action Plan (2020–2025)

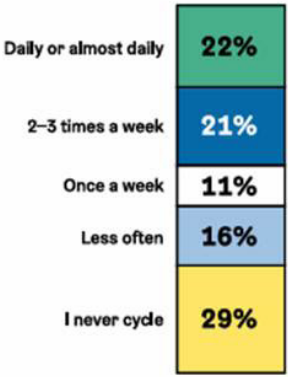
The Bicycle Action Plan (2020–2025) is the city’s current blueprint for expanding and improving its cycling network. It aims to raise cycling’s modal share from around 9–11% (in recent years) to 20% by 2035, with an interim goal of 13% by 2025. Specific objectives include:

1. **Filling Network Gaps:** Completing high-quality cycling “superhighways” (baanas) that link major suburbs, job centers, and transit nodes.
2. **Year-Round Accessibility:** Extending intensive winter maintenance to at least 150 km of priority cycle routes by 2025, addressing snow and ice concerns that deter potential cyclists.
3. **Resource Allocation:** Increasing annual cycling-related investment to around €20–€23 million, closer to levels seen in leading cycling cities like Copenhagen.

Strategic Targets & Modal Share Goals

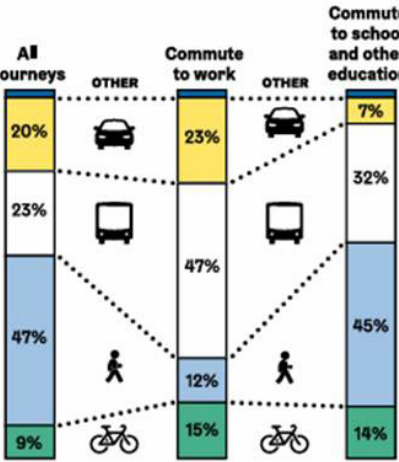
More than half of Helsinki residents cycle weekly

Cycling in snow-free periods
Source: Cycling Barometer 2022



Modal share of trips made in 2022

Source: Mobility habits of Helsinki residents in 2022



TRAFFIC SAFETY PROGRAM & VISION ZERO

Helsinki has adopted **Vision Zero**, a global traffic safety philosophy aiming to eliminate fatalities and severe injuries in road traffic. First introduced in the 2014 Traffic Safety Development Programme, it has been reaffirmed in the Helsinki Traffic Safety Development Programme (2022–2026). This aligns with EU goals to reach zero traffic deaths by 2050.

Goals & Core Principles

1. **Zero Tolerance for Death or Serious Injury:** The city aims to halve road fatalities and serious injuries by 2030 (relative to 2020 figures) and achieve zero by 2050.
2. **Focus on Vulnerable Groups:** Pedestrians, cyclists, older adults, and children are prioritized. Planners routinely assess school routes, crosswalks, and cycling intersections to target improvements where they’re most needed.
3. **Data-Informed Measures:** Accident data, traffic behavior, and resident feedback guide investments and interventions—whether speed limit adjustments, redesigned intersections, or public awareness campaigns.

Helsinki Traffic Safety Development Programme (2022–2026)

The Helsinki Traffic Safety Development Programme for 2022–2026 is a continuation of the city’s long-standing commitment to improving traffic safety, aligning with Vision Zero and European Union traffic safety goals. This program emphasizes a data-driven and interdisciplinary approach to creating safer urban mobility, focusing on measures that directly address the needs of vulnerable groups while fostering collaboration across stakeholders.

Sources:

- [Construction of cycle paths](#)
- [Bicycle Action Plan 2020–2025 \(PDF\)](#)
- [Bicycle Account 2023 \(PDF\)](#)
- [Guide for planning bicycle traffic \(PDF, in Finnish, Vaylä\)](#)
- [Health promotion by stealth: active transportation success in Helsinki, Finland](#)
- [City Planning Review -Development Programme for Moving Around Helsinki \(2016\)](#)
- [Helsinki Traffic Safety Development Programme \(2022–2026\)](#)

IV. Other Initiatives

HELSINKI’S CHILD FRIENDLY CITY INITIATIVE

In September 2024, Helsinki was formally recognized by UNICEF Finland as a Child Friendly City, making it the first Nordic capital to receive this designation. This recognition reflects Helsinki’s commitment to promoting children’s rights, health, safety, and well-being in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Background

Helsinki joined the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI) in 2021, following a City Council initiative. The CFCI model helps municipalities identify areas for development concerning children’s rights and outlines actions to ensure these rights are upheld.

Key Focus: Enhancing Children’s Sense of Safety in Urban Spaces

One of the key goals of [Helsinki’s Child Friendly City Action Plan](#) (2022–2024), Helsinki’s efforts to enhance children’s sense of safety in urban spaces are driven by insights from situational surveys that highlighted young people’s feelings of insecurity in certain areas. The city has implemented various pilot projects and integrated safety goals into its broader urban development plans.

Helsinki has prioritized this goal in its 2024 city budget, **embedding safety objectives into urban renewal projects** to prevent regional segregation and promote cohesive community development. The work is supported by cross-sectoral collaboration among city divisions, with regular **assessments based on research**, such as the School Health Promotion Study.

SUBURBAN REGENERATION IN HELSINKI: MALMI, KONTULA, AND MELLUNKYLÄ

Helsinki’s suburban regeneration initiative aims to enhance livability, prevent socio-economic segregation, and reinvigorate aging districts that have not kept pace with the city’s broader development. Malmi, Kontula (within the Mellunkylä district), and several other post-war suburbs have become the focal points of these efforts. Many of these suburbs were built between the 1950s and 1980s and face outdated buildings, public spaces in need of repair, and a high share of rental housing. By pairing infrastructural investment with placemaking and community engagement, Helsinki hopes to transform under-resourced neighborhoods into vibrant, inclusive urban centers.

Strategic Goals

A core objective is to close the gap between neighborhoods that have received steady investment and those that have aged without substantial updates.

Under the City Strategy, Helsinki emphasizes preventing segregation: ensuring that socio-economic factors do not cluster disproportionately in certain areas. Targeted infill development, infrastructure overhauls, and enhanced local services aim to diversify housing types and reinvigorate these districts.

Placemaking & Community Engagement

At the heart of Helsinki’s suburban renewal is **placemaking**—a philosophy that transforms public spaces by actively involving residents in design and planning. Rather than imposing top-down solutions, city officials invite local people to share ideas on playground designs, new seating arrangements, outdoor markets, and events. These small-scale interventions inject fresh energy into older squares and parks while reinforcing a sense of collective ownership.

Malmi: A New “City Within a City”

In the northeast of Helsinki, **Malmi** is experiencing a multi-pronged renewal approach. First, the old Malmi Airport site (Malminkenttä) is being repurposed for housing and public amenities. Plans include thousands of new homes, schools, daycare centers, and a large central park that preserves the area’s historic aviation heritage. Construction on the first parcels should yield apartments by the mid-2020s, with full development continuing into the 2030s.

Complementing this large-scale infill, the **Malmi town center** is undergoing an upgrade. The busy railway station—long criticized for worn-out infrastructure—will be modernized, and public squares (Ylä-Malmi and Ala-Malmi) will receive comprehensive renovations to create welcoming public realms.

One core intention behind Malmi’s regeneration is **diversifying housing**. Historically, the area has relied heavily on rental units. With more owner-occupied and mixed-tenure developments, policymakers hope to balance the socio-economic profile and attract a broader spectrum of residents. By 2035, city planners envision Malmi as a self-sustaining sub-center—“a city within a city,” complete with modern infrastructure, public spaces, and close-knit community amenities.

