

A Timberbuild Renaissance for Europe

Building accounts for the largest chunk of the continent's energy bill, 40%.

One way or another Europe needs to radically reduce this. Wood-based construction is a common sense, if usually ignored, option. Time and again, the point is made that wood is both the most sustainable and a living, renewable material. And today, there is renewed interest in wood. All over the continent innovative and exciting timber buildings are going up, particularly in the home of timberbuild tradition, Scandinavia. Could these new timberbuild shoots be transformed into a much larger programme, so affecting the energy bill, and storing carbon in the process?

This scenario, the first in a series of green-sky thinking, considers whether with most of Europe an endless clearing, a possible solution might be to use the Scandinavian forests' extra timber across Europe, so enabling real and radical reforestation to take root right across the continent.



The Sibelius Hall, Lahti, Finland



photos Sibelius Hall, Finland

In the north of the world the boreal forest never lets up. From far eastern Siberia to Norway's Atlantic coasts, and on again across Canada, a green halo of trees – mainly pine and spruce plus a hardy regional birch – encircles the planet. Bar winter's lengthy whiteout, an endless sea of dark conifer green shrouds the northerly latitudes, where the shortest of growing seasons ensures agriculture finds only the

fleetest of footings, leaving the trees, albeit amply managed, to remain. For Europe, the closest connections to these endless forests are in the Nordic countries: Finland, Sweden and Norway, the powerhouse of the continent's timber industry.

These Nordic countries are also home to one of the most respected timber architectural traditions on the planet. From Finland in the east to Norway in the west,

an identifiably regional timber architecture and building culture has maintained unrivalled influence in the midst of far reaching changes in other European countries. Since the north's best known architect, Alvar Aalto, brought regionalist Finnish modernism to international attention in the 1940s and 50s, by including wood in his repertoire of core materials, the Nordic countries have been recognised for a timber mod-

ernism that contrasts with middle and southern Europe's continuing besotted preoccupation with twentieth-century artificial materials. Aalto's frequently quoted statement that 'wood will no doubt maintain its position as the most important material for sensitive architectural clients' seems truer today than it has ever done. For in the post-Kyoto world, trees and forests have taken on a new significance. European architects