

For  
affordable  
& quality  
housing

**Statement**

Presented on the occasion of the Affordable  
Housing Activation Forum held in Madrid  
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**Architects' Council of Europe**  
Conseil des Architectes d'Europe

**The Architects' Council of Europe is composed of 44 Member Organisations which are the national regulatory and professional representative bodies in the EU Member States, the accession countries, the UK, Switzerland and Norway. Through its members, the Architects' Council of Europe represents the interests of over half a million of architects from 30 countries in Europe.**

Currently, many European countries are experiencing a housing crisis, characterised by a shortage of affordable housing, a loss in quality of new constructions as well as a poor quality of a significant number of existing dwellings. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought into sharper focus the importance of the place we live in. It has contributed to reveal glaring inequalities in our society as regards housing and deepened the inequalities between populations, neighbourhoods and regions.

The lack of housing stock is being deepened as Europe is currently encountering the biggest migration crisis since World War II. Over the past two months more than five million war refugees entered the European Union with up to three millions more expected to come in the near future. The current housing crisis, combined with challenges raised by climate change, the pandemic and migration of refugees, call for *affordable* and *high-quality* housing for all to be considered as a matter of general interest and become a priority of public authorities.

Addressing this crisis requires us to put an end to the search for short-term economic gains and the downward spiral of standardisation. We urgently need to adopt an attitude that favours common good and quality of life and puts people and nature at the core of housing and urban developments.

In the area of housing, we share common issues and ambitions despite cultural differences and approaches among countries. In Europe, the way we inhabit our planet has been elevated to the highest political level with the New European Bauhaus, which invites us collectively to reimagine our living spaces in order to make them more sustainable, inclusive and beautiful.

Housing models must be rethought in this spirit, so as to recover architectural, urban and landscape quality; to take inspiration from social economic models; and to reinforce access to common functions and basic services (work, shops, leisure, care, etc.). Contrary to the modernist model that has split the functions in our cities for so many decades, liveability lies where reasonable urban density meets the proper mixed uses of daily life, in walkable, resilient European cities.

## ACHIEVING GREATER QUALITY IN HOUSING

The quality of places we live in has a fundamental impact on our quality of life and our capacity to fulfil our fundamental needs. Poor housing conditions can have severe impacts on our well-being, health, productivity, learning capacity and social life. Yet, due to standardised and “one-size-fits-all” solutions, one-dimensional approaches and excessive focus on economic or technical aspects, the quality of new housing is deteriorating across Europe.

This poor quality is noticeable, in the first place, in a reduction of surface areas and volumes and is often characterised by:

- Small rooms and low floor-ceiling heights, resulting in spaces that are difficult to furnish
- Construction materials of poor quality, resulting in poor indoor environmental quality, energy inefficiency and shorter lifespan
- Low exposure to natural light
- Insufficient air renewal
- Lack of storage space
- Common spaces that are not well appreciated or simply missing
- No access to outdoor space
- Lack of quick and walkable access to basic daily/weekly facilities and amenities for culture, sport, health, education and nature
- Lack of green areas and common outdoor space

For an acceptable social life and quality of life, we need collectively to set design objectives that make it possible to go beyond programmatic functionality, to be able to use our living spaces in a beneficial manner.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Organise public debates and consultations on housing quality** in all EU Member States in order to bring together decision-makers, public authorities, citizens and built environment professionals to discuss the minimum quality criteria for housing (size, height, light, outdoor space, storage as well as location, urban density, access to facilities and public transport) and agree on collective design objectives.
- **Promote the Davos *Baukultur* Quality System<sup>1</sup>**, which provides for eight criteria for assessing the quality of places. This system proves to be a useful and simple tool for all stakeholders wishing to promote quality in the built environment.
- **Encourage housing experimentation** to let innovative housing solutions emerge.
- **Increase the size of housing** by decoupling land-value from the number of square metres of building space and think of housing quality in terms of volume rather than in terms of surface area. The reference to space or volume (in m<sup>3</sup>) gives the possibility of changing the uses of housing and introducing the idea of flexibility. Increased volume favours the quantity of air that naturally circulates in the dwelling, makes larger openings possible and thereby provides for greater exposure to natural light.
- **Systematically include in housing projects outdoor spaces, green areas and common spaces for shared functions.**

<sup>1</sup>[Davos Baukultur Quality System](#)

## PROMOTING QUALITY AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING THROUGH FINANCIAL REGULATION AND INCENTIVES

Sale and rental prices have increased since the 2000s without any correlation with the increase in construction prices or with the increase in housing demand. This increase in prices is mainly due to speculative behaviour on the real estate market. This trend has been aggravated partly by the rise in construction materials costs and also by problems in supply chains. Due to the increased 'financialisation' of housing production, detaching it from real demand and with the aim of making a quick profit, the quality of new housing has been deteriorating while prices have increased. Short-term economic arguments tend to favour investments in luxury housing projects instead of renovating and bringing to the market the vast unoccupied building stock. There is a need to promoting quality and affordable housing through financial regulation and incentives.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Make public financial incentives for the construction and renovation of public and private housing conditional on:** achieving high quality standards (guaranteed by comprehensive design studies); meeting environmental requirements; building new construction in the vicinity of transport infrastructures, schools, etc.
- **Evaluate the number of financial entities involved in any single housing operation** in order to avoid significantly increasing the 'carrying cost' of the project.
- **Encourage the fight against unbridled capital gains on land**, notably by adopting measures to curb construction final/sale prices.
- **Establish maximum periods of time in which land plots must be developed, from the moment of their acquisition**, to avoid vacant plots and encourage a more transparent land market.
- **Consider the benefits of the Community Land Trust (CLT)<sup>2</sup>**, which permits the separation of the building from the land. CLT is a rapidly raising model in many countries, demonstrating good results in the proper using of public plots of land, active involvement of future residents, quality-based design through competition results and fair pricing, especially in expensive emerging or established cities.
- **Create a label that recognises and gives visibility to operators that commit to limiting their return on investment.**

<sup>2</sup>CLT

## EXPLORING NEW FORMS OF GOVERNANCE FOR THE MORE INCLUSIVE PRODUCTION OF HOUSING

Improving the quality of housing requires the review of current housing production mechanisms. Architectural Design Competitions, which are a prerequisite for quality housing, are often being abandoned and replaced by design and build consultation procedures that meet private interests to the detriment of the public / general interest. New forms of governance are also to be explored for the management of projects and a more inclusive consideration of residents' needs and expectations.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Choose procurement procedures that favour quality over price.** The choice of the procurement procedure, whether private or public, has a strong impact on the final quality of the outcome. A high-quality housing stock requires a suitable legal framework for public procurement that favours quality over price.
- **Increase the use of Architectural Design Competitions,** in public and private procurement. ADCs are a quality-based and project-oriented selection procedure, which enable a contracting authority to acquire a plan or design selected by a jury. They are a source for innovative, economic and sustainable solutions and make it possible to benefit from the extensive know-how available in the market.
- **Apply rules for the awarding of quality project management contracts for social housing:** supervise the use of “comprehensive contracts” (design and build), make it compulsory for architects to provide a full service, including - in the case of sale off plan - reinforcement of the use of architectural competitions.
- **Encourage participatory housing, self-development, the setting up of residents' cooperatives, and crowdfunding,** with the incorporation of various public and shared programmes, in order to reduce the profit-margins of traditional development and reinvest them in larger, multifunctional housing.

- **Encourage the active participation of citizens.** By putting people at the heart of the design process, citizens are empowered to participate in the creation and regeneration of the urban fabric. They help decision-makers to understand communities' needs and thus to achieve socially and economically sustainable projects. In particular, cooperative development methods should be explored (participatory housing, residents' cooperatives and collective self-development).
- **Enable flexibility and experimentation in planning and building regulations.** If applied in a strict manner, planning and building regulations may prevent creative solutions from emerging and undermine the quality of projects. Although they provide a minimum baseline that guarantees that technical standards are met, they are insufficient to ensure quality outcomes. A high-quality built environment requires flexibility with respect to the regulatory framework.

## DESIGNING A MORE SUSTAINABLE HOUSING STOCK

The way we inhabit our planet is undoubtedly a driver of the unfolding climate and biodiversity crisis. The living environment we have created, and the way we manage it, consumes vast quantities of land, raw materials and fossil fuel energies - and generates significant amounts of greenhouse gas emissions and waste. We must change, urgently, the way our built environment is designed, built, maintained, renovated, managed and regulated.

In the European Union, the majority of the built floor area is composed of residential buildings (76% on average), a large proportion of which was built before thermal standards were introduced. If we want to meet our climate objectives, it is crucial to renovate and extend the life of existing housing to improve their performance, save the carbon they embody, avoid the generation of waste, but also seize this opportunity to undertake a functional and aesthetic upgrade of housing and neighbourhoods to improve the well-being of occupants.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Favour the renovation of the housing stock.** Feasibility studies should always be conducted to thoroughly explore the potential for renovation. While demolition can be the best option in specific cases, building conservation and retrofit should always be envisaged as a preferred option.
- **Apply circular economy principles.** Developing circular economy principles in the built environment is fundamentally about changing the way we design our buildings to ensure that they can be easily operated, maintained, repaired, re-used or adapted to new needs.
- **Promote bio- and geo-sourced as well as secondary construction materials.** The transition to a truly sustainable built environment requires us to produce and mainstream the use of local and low carbon construction materials. They contribute to a healthier indoor environment through better air quality while at the same time reducing carbon emissions.

- **Encourage urban regeneration and adaptive re-use of the existing built environment:**
  - Reclaim obsolete business and office areas in city centres and at the entrances of cities, renovate and market the empty housing stock, reintroduce housing and functional diversity (fab lab, co-working, renewable energy production units, etc.) as well as urban, architectural and landscape quality, biodiversity, infiltration areas etc;
  - Encourage the adaptive re-use of heritage buildings: as underlined in the Leeuwarden Declaration<sup>3</sup>, through smart renovation, heritage places can find new uses that meet the needs of our time, including housing. As a result, their social, environmental and economic value is increased, while their cultural significance is enhanced.
  - Move towards a more sustainable housing model – ecologically, and humanly speaking – by aiming for a better balance of stocks between territories.
- **Consider whole life carbon emissions.** Around 10% of energy-related GHG emissions are attributable to embodied carbon, which is caused by the manufacturing of construction materials, their transportation and the whole building process. A greater evaluation of the full environmental impacts of buildings over their life cycle, taking into account both operational and embodied carbon, is necessary. This would create the business case for prioritising lifecycle extension over demolition and would foster the use of local and bio-sourced materials. The EU Level(s) scheme<sup>4</sup>, which offers a common set of indicators to measure the environmental performance of buildings across their life cycle, can support such a move.
- **Prioritise simple, passive, low-tech, locally tested solutions** that do not consume energy and are less prone to human error. Without denying the benefits of smart technical systems, there is ample evidence that these systems might have unintended consequences, including higher than expected energy consumption.
- **Encourage green areas extension and creating new green areas within cities.** Extending green areas is the simplest way of dealing with CO2 and bad air quality within cities. Incentives should be prepared for achieving better than obligatory minimum greenery ratio, planting trees, creating pocket parks etc.

<sup>3</sup> [Leeuwarden Declaration](#)

<sup>4</sup> [EU Level\(s\) scheme](#)

- **Reduce car transportation with promoting the concept of “city of proximity”**, use of public transport, cycling and car sharing. If all the everyday services (school, shop, restaurants, gym, health clinic, park, etc.) are provided within walking distance and other amenities (workplace, theatre, cinema, sport centre, etc.) within cycling distance or accessible by public transport, members of contemporary urban society can live high-quality life without private cars. Moreover, reducing parking ratio requirements affects final price of the apartments thus making the concept of “city of proximity” more affordable.
- **Promote multi-family (social) housing typology** instead of single family housing model as the most sustainable way of living. Single family house dwellings are land consuming and require additional infrastructure (roads, utilities). Both are very inefficient when calculating per one housing unit. Moreover, single-family housing estates are usually not connected to public transportation system, which require individual use of car transportation on daily basis. Therefore, even when built according to passive or energy+ standards, new single-family housing estates are far from being carbon neutral.

## **AT LOCAL LEVEL, URBAN PLANNING DOCUMENTS ARE THE PRIMARY TOOLS FOR PRODUCING QUALITY HOUSING.**

In order to play their role, planning tools require greater quality and a better territorial contextualisation. Public authorities, especially in medium-sized and small municipalities, need support from experts to guide and inform their decisions, in the interest of the common good. Expert-based decisions and quality procedures are two prerequisites to achieve housing of greater quality.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- **Encourage public authorities to carry out architectural, urban and landscape feasibility studies**, by means of internal or external advice. Call on the expertise of multidisciplinary teams (architects, landscape architects, town-planners) when drawing up urban planning documents and regulations so that these documents are better adapted to control the "right to build" and allow for better local consultation with stakeholders.
- **Launch professional, political and public debates on urban density**, mixed use and naturebased solutions for existing and new neighbourhoods and major urban projects. Controlled, balanced urban density means liveability, walkability and resilience. Greenfield lands the most precious and most endangered resource in Europe. Greenfield developments usually have longterm downsides, even if presenting local advantages.
- **Raise authorised building heights**, encouraging the construction of grouped or intermediate typologies, compatible with the expectation of an individual lifestyle.
- **Consider mobility issues** when planning new housing projects. Housing must be easily accessible by public transport and soft modes of transport.
- **Avoid housing projects in risk-prone areas**. Our built environment needs to be planned and designed with adaptation to climate change issues.

- **Support an ambitious public land policy:** set up a public holding of land that has been identified as strategic by the local authorities, to control the costs of sales.
- **Support brownfield redevelopment** with incentives and setting priority on urban planning documents. In many European cities there are still vast industrial or post-industrial areas which may be successfully redeveloped to housing and mixed-use. The process can be encouraged and fastened with setting priority on urban planning documents for the areas, supporting land exchange to move operating facilities, tax reduction and other financial incentives.
- **Prevent uncontrolled urban sprawl** with proper urban planning policy. Location of new housing estates on the outskirts of existing urban fabric should be conditional on proximity of everyday services and facilities as well as public transportation system. Alternatively, the location should be made conditional on building appropriate number of community services and amenities as well as connection to public transportation system.

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