

Hungary: From Streets to Homes Associations (ULE)

Renovating the unfit housing stock: Case Study #3



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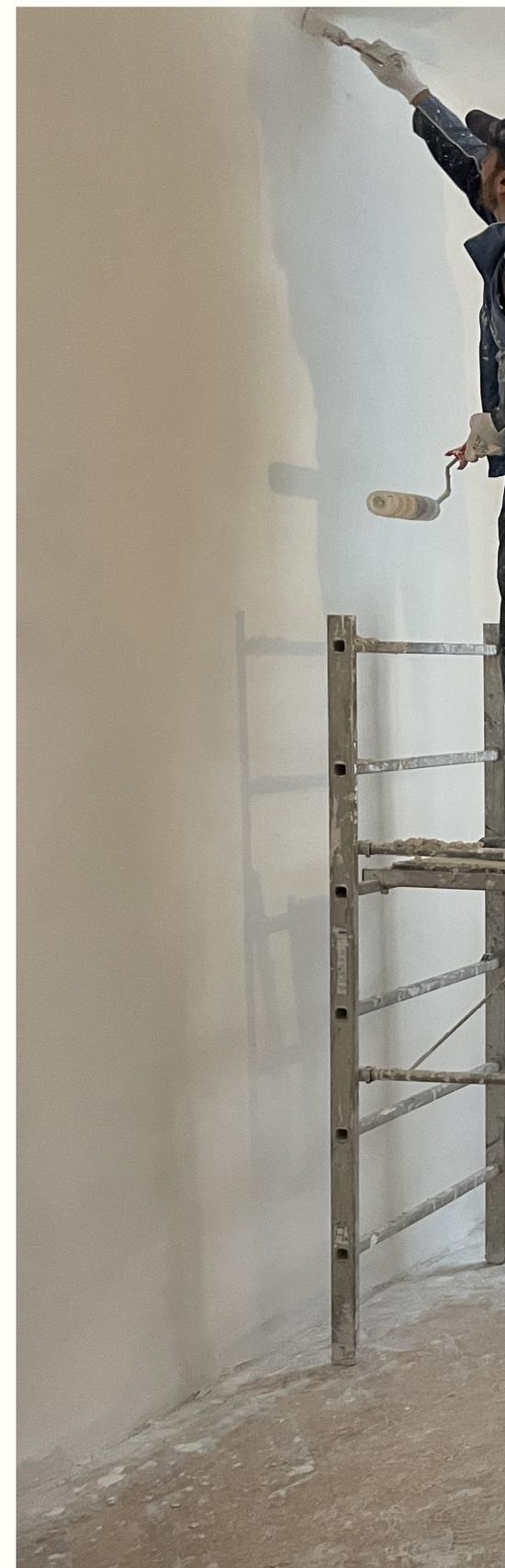
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Future tenants are encouraged to participate as much as they like in the renovations

1. Context

In Hungary, housing poverty is a growing problem for which affected households have a very limited number of solutions to help tackle it. All vulnerable groups, such as minorities, disabled or chronically ill people, single parents, and the working poor face hardships when it comes to affording rentals or accessing ownership, especially in Budapest. Simultaneously, the poor condition of privately owned stock is a key problem in the Hungarian countryside. While housing poverty affects a growing ratio of the population, people in homelessness are the most vulnerable. In 2023, over ten thousand homeless people were staying in shelters or sleeping rough. Shelters are often in a poor state and are not always able to accommodate people with

different needs: e.g., couples cannot necessarily stay together, or pets may not be allowed. Some homeless people choose to live in self-built or occupied empty shacks, mostly in urban forest areas. Shacks provide a roof and the possibility to live more independently compared to shelters, with partners, friends, and pets. However, these shacks are far from being adequate housing solutions. Homeless people face police harassment, as rough sleeping is banned constitutionally. While living in outer areas reduces the chance of interaction with police, the demolition of shacks is also a risk faced by the people living in it. The chances of a person exiting homelessness is very low - even becoming a tenant of a municipality owned flat is barely accessible,

and private rents are unaffordable.

The challenge of tackling housing poverty and homelessness is assigned to local municipalities, which are increasingly defunded year after year. Only very few municipalities offer programs helping people to exit homelessness. Social housing is owned by municipalities for which the stock is ever declining, and the share of vacant municipal flats is high. Vacancy is often due to low-quality management and to the deteriorated conditions of the flats.

Motivation

The motivation behind the project is to provide housing solutions for homeless people by renovating vacant (municipal) flats and returning them to an affordable housing supply. There are many vacant municipal social housing

“Every family who is housed is a living example of the fact that homelessness can be eliminated by providing affordable homes”

units waiting for improvements, while many people are living in shacks waiting for decent housing conditions. The ‘From Huts to Homes’ program aims to provide an example of how the renovation of vacant buildings can be a good housing solution for homeless people, especially if housing first principles are applied. The program started when people living in an urban forest in shacks were threatened by demolition of their homes. To resolve this issue, the munici-

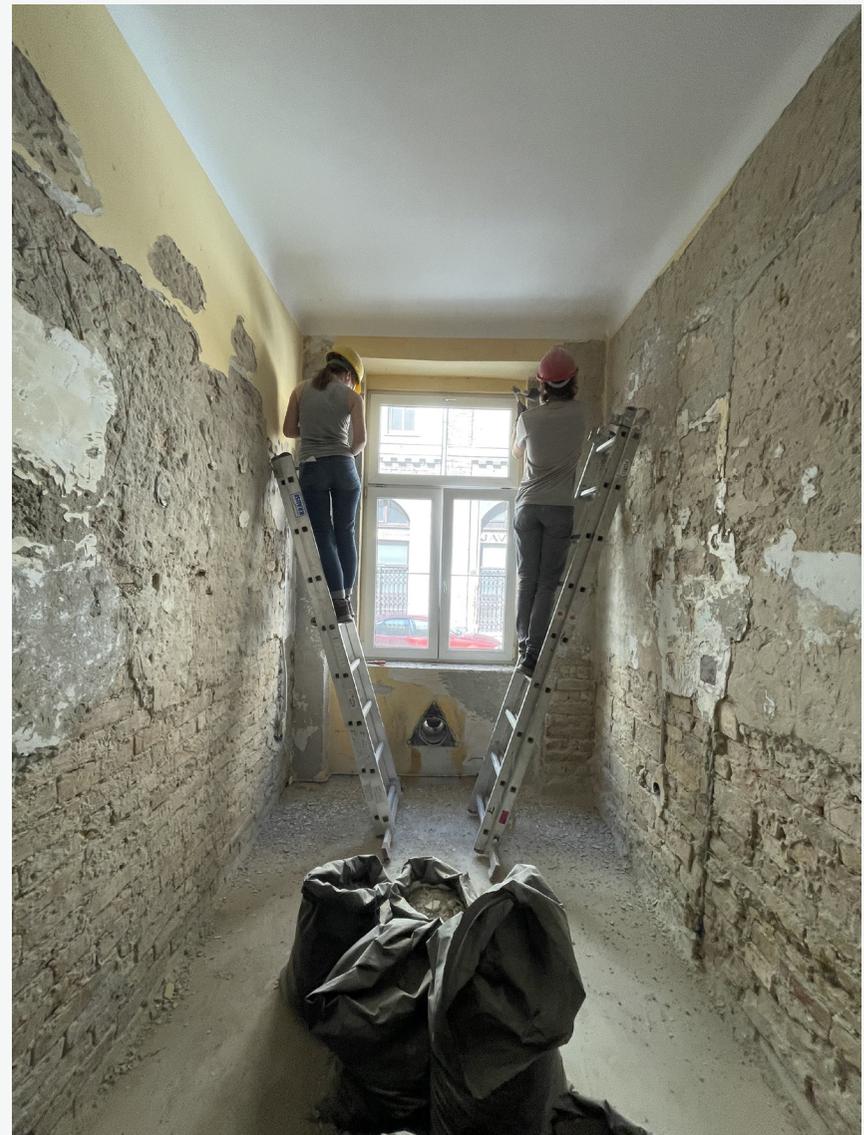
pality was approached to find a solution. Finally empty social housing units were assigned and renovated by volunteers. This led to the foundation of the **From Streets to Homes Association (ULE)**. Since then, the association cooperates with municipalities and finds other ways to provide housing solutions.

Source of Inspiration

Every family who is housed is a living example of the fact that homelessness can be eliminated by providing affordable homes. However, the number of our own clients is not high and most likely never will be. We do think about ourselves not as a charity but as a pilot and a flagship of the necessary social policy changes.

Our solution is visibly and undeniably working, and it shows decision makers that they could

make steps to tackle homelessness through other means than mass shelters.



During a window renovation to improve insulation

2. Project Description

The **From Huts to Homes** program takes a housing first approach, offering housing to people in homelessness through the renovation of vacant municipal flats. It also supports the clients moving into the apartments in their financial and mental needs through social work. The association cooperates with municipalities who hand over dilapidated properties for renovation, and in exchange the association gains tenant assignment rights. The renovated apartments are provided to homeless people as social housing units. The **From Huts to Homes** program started in 2012 in the 10th district of Budapest. Our first tenants moved in 2013. Future tenants

“The association cooperates with municipalities who hand over dilapidated properties for renovation, and in exchange ...the renovated apartments are provided to homeless people as social housing units.”

can apply to join the program via street social workers. If onboarded, they may begin working with colleagues of the association a couple of months before moving in, during the period of renovation for their future flat - which they are



Completed window renovation with individual gas heater

encouraged to take as part as much in as they can. Renovation is completed with the help of our volunteers conducted by our technical team. Once the flat is renovated, furniture and household essentials are provided. The program's key method of social work is strong individual case management. Community social work and active participation of tenants and volunteers are also a core element of the work.

In the program there are many families who need to be reunited when moving in. Often, the children of homeless parents are in institutional care and accessing the parent's housing is key for reunification. We recently had a hut-dweller family

reach the point where their three daughters could return to the parents from care homes. To reach this goal, we renovated the flat in 2020, including upgrading the utilities, electricity, and water system of the long-time abandoned flat, and the outer insulation of walls. We worked with the parents in intensive social work and our colleague assisted them in the process of claiming back the children from the ward. The process in Hungary is shamefully long sometimes, in this case the parents needed to wait three years to be reunited with their kids. When the family had the permission to bring the girls home, it was already 2022. Then we installed a mezzanine to make more room for the daughters; the flat was big enough for the couple, but too small for more than one child to live with them. That's why we

decided to add a new level in one of the rooms, so their daughters could have their privacy. The family is very cooperative, they take good care of the house and contributed to the renovations.

If needed, we support our clients with social work as soon as they enter the program. Through this kind of cooperation, we have provided housing for 51 people already. So far, we have renovated 28 empty social housing units in four municipalities.

We have three specialised groups for helping our tenants in their private life: the **Give Work Group**, for getting a job, the **Woman's Group**, for help developing a community for traumatised women, and a **peer program**, lead by our experienced tenants helping the new tenants.

“We support our clients with social work as soon as they enter the program if they need it...we have provided housing for 51 people already.”

Beyond the **From Huts to Homes** program, we started a **Housing Agency** in 2015 involving using private flats to provide social housing for homeless people and housing for social workers and nursery workers. We currently have 30 flats. In the frame of the **Housing Agency**, we rent vacant private apartments below the market price. If needed, we also take care of the renovation.

To respond to the Ukrainian refugee’s crisis, we started a program helping them for longer stays, now it has become an internationally funded rent support program.

Target Group

In the **From Huts to Homes** program we target people in homelessness, the majority of whom are living in self-built huts. These people already maintain a household in their forest huts, and many of them have a regular income. We mostly onboard people to the program who either have the biggest chance to integrate back into society, especially parents who have their children institutionalised due to the lack of housing, and those who are the most vulnerable, such as COPD patients and wheelchair users who need assistance on the long term, and who would

possibly not survive another winter “outside”. For example, we met two parents and their two sons and three daughters who had been in state care. The couple was continuously working but still not able to get affordable rent in Budapest, so they built a hut in the woods of the tenth district. The three daughters are now reunited with the parents. The two sons’ housing has been secured in another way.

Issues Addressed by Measures

The measures address homelessness, housing vacancy, and housing supply shortage in the social rental sector. The main social problem is the housing crisis, and extremely expensive rents and real estate. By providing intensive social work the association responds to the weak social network which is not protecting

families and individuals from slipping down the social ladder. The individual and community social work also helps to tackle a large spectrum of our clients’ problems, such as lack of access to legal and quality jobs, or bad physical and mental health status. Our clients are mostly undereducated people, who fall out or were excluded from quality education.

Stakeholders involved

We work together continuously with Budapest’s 10th district’s municipality, and occasionally with other municipalities of Budapest as well.

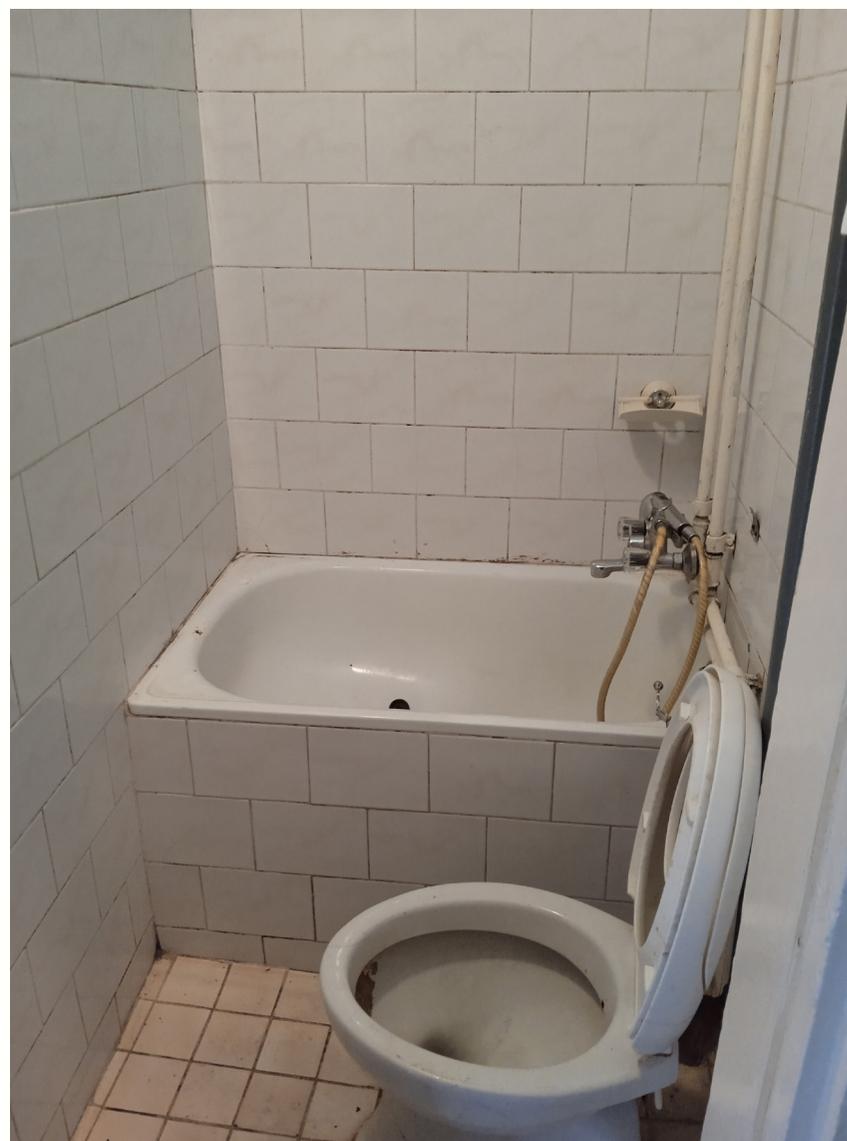
We always reach out to local street social work providers who know the people in need. We hold volunteering days during the renovation, so any individual can come and help, and we hire

some specialists for skilled work.

Funding

Funding of our program comes from private subsidies, grants, crowdfunding, company donors, and in some cases direct EU funding. Our crowdfunding methods also stand for our visibility: we arrange events as running ambassadors, art exhibitions and auctions, donation collecting concerts and other events, as well as media campaigns and donations of one percent of personal income tax. We also get material donations from companies such as building materials and tools. The cost of the renovation of a flat is around two to five million HUF. This covers general interventions - the replacement of doors and windows, the pouring of floor

concrete, and insulation interventions, which can be considered as energy efficiency improvements. Besides these expenses, we also need to cover the salary of social workers.

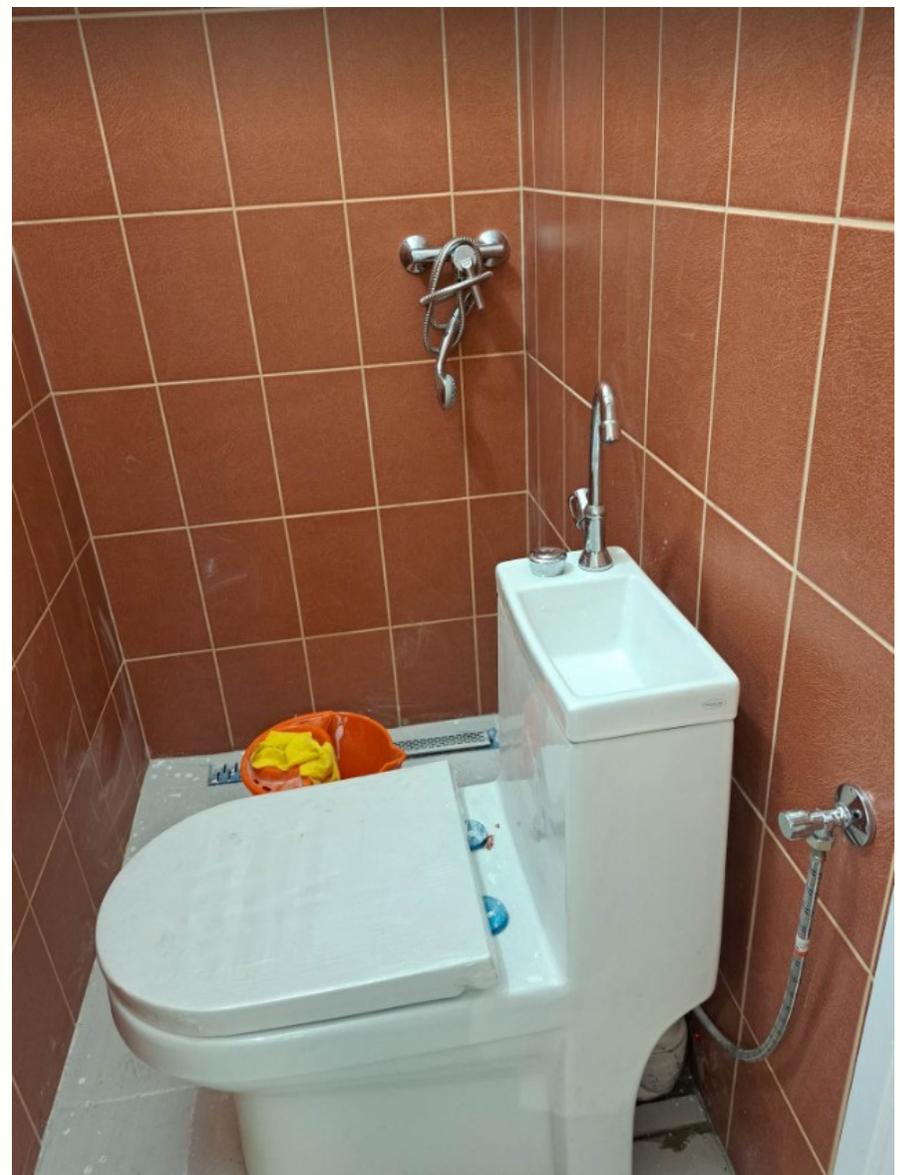


3. Outcomes

Positive Outcomes

We have 25 flats for our **Housing First program** in the 10th district and have expanded our work to the neighbouring districts. Now we have 110 Hungarian tenants and offer housing subsidies for 330 Ukrainian refugees. These people otherwise would face the risk of falling or falling back to homelessness. In all programs we offer social work and do advocacy too: any client of ours who is brave enough to share their stories can become part of our awareness raising work.

As an outcome of the cooperation with municipalities we have already renovated 28 vacant municipal units and returned them to the social housing supply.



Bathroom after renovations: improved sanitation

With our visibility, we aim to change the way society sees homelessness and housing poverty, and we are proud to have our clients on board with this task. Additionally, our volunteer program is the result of our efforts to raise the level of solidarity.

Innovation and Key Success Factors

- ◀ Providing housing first to homeless people by renovating vacant municipal units to the social housing supply.
- ◀ The clients moving in had little other hope to access decent housing.
- ◀ Flats would most probably remain vacant without renovation.
- ◀ By involving volunteers, renovation costs can be reduced. Social cohesion is strengthened as volunteers are sensitised to severe housing

programs and people with different social backgrounds work together.

Barriers and Difficulties

- ◀ Lack of sufficient funding to carry out more complex energy efficient renovations. Green mechanical engineering solutions, energy efficient devices or access to renewables could certainly be included when renovating the apartments, but extra funding would be necessary for that. Funding would also be needed to learn about and try out alternative or green solutions. This package would require additional resources and knowledge or learning opportunities.
- ◀ The lack of a national housing policy. As there is no rental housing programme run by the state, housing needs from people are overwhelming. Consequently, there is an enor-

mous oversubscription to our programmes. Social services and the care system (like addictologist and psychological support) to help the people in need are missing or far from being sufficient.

- ◀ All this happens in an environment where the government regularly blames the poor and targets homeless people with negative campaigns and criminalisation.
- ◀ Lack of funding for renovation of social housing units.
- ◀ The service provided by the association is not eligible for normative state funding provided for other social services, despite being innovative and effective housing and social work provision for homeless people. Consequently, financing the renovation and the social work needs constant fundraising

activity.

- ◀ Due to the lack of funding for renovations and the bad shape of vacant municipal dwellings, complex energy efficiency measures do not always fit in the renovations, thus energy bills can be higher than necessary.

Keys of Transferability

The “housing first” (HF) method is proven to work in many European cities, and we are the first to test it on a program level in Hungary: we provide services as HF core standards require, for unlimited time. The approach shall be implemented by municipalities in Hungary too.

The renovation of the inhabitable apartments needs to have a great funding program, so it could lower the effects of the housing crisis.

Policy Recommendations

To mobilise vacant buildings through renovation for housing first purposes, the following policy changes would be necessary:

- ◀ Sufficient and systematic financial support for the maintenance and energy efficient renovation of apartments of the municipalities
- ◀ Development of a centralised rental housing policy to enlarge the affordable and good quality housing offer.
- ◀ The most deprived people should be systematically prioritised when selecting tenants for public housing, such as those without homes, the residents in institutions, or those who are staying in accommodation by courtesy.
- ◀ Relieve problematic structural inequality between city and the countryside accommodation and employment possibilities, to reduce pressure on urban institutional and care systems.
- ◀ Shelters in unworthy conditions should be eliminated by large scale renovation programs and possibly turning part of longer-term shelter accommodations and vacant dwellings into housing first units.
- ◀ Housing first approach should gain more space in homelessness policy and more units should be available to secure a way out of homelessness.



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