

# THE NEW EUROPEAN BAUHAUS: THE CROSSROAD WHERE ARTS AND HOUSING AFFORDABILITY MUST MEET

The New European Bauhaus (NEB) initiative was launched by the European Commission in the framework of its “renovation wave”. The core idea of the original Bauhaus was based on a social approach where art was to serve a social role. In this article, Sorcha Edwards explains how the New European Bauhaus contains real potential based on the success of the inclusive, beautiful and affordable housing developed by the members of Housing Europe.



By **Sorcha Edwards**, Secretary General, Housing Europe

A year since the global health pandemic has made staying at home and keeping social distance the new norm, social and affordable housing providers continue going the extra mile to ensure that tenants have a home where they can feel safe. The recently launched 'State of Housing 2021' report clearly shows that as little as a 5% increase of households living in poor housing conditions can result in 50% higher risk of incidence and a 42% chance of losing the battle with the coronavirus. In other words, the strong link between adequate homes and health has now become obvious to governments in all corners of the world.

In many European countries, the COVID-19 crisis has led to growing waiting lists for social housing, impoverishment of tenants, and an increasing necessity to find appropriate stable accommodation for homeless people. While the EU recovery plans focus on the renovation of existing buildings, the supply of adequate affordable housing for low-income households and the most vulnerable groups remains a question mark to a large extent.

Some parts of the jigsaw puzzle are coming together. This January, a solid majority of MEPs voted on the own-initiative report of Dutch MEP Kim van Sparrentak from the Greens who calls for "Access to decent and affordable housing for all" and eradicating homelessness

by 2030. The recently announced Action Plan for the implementation of the European Pillar for Social Rights to set up a 'European Platform on Combating Homelessness' is an important step to tackle an already existing problem. At the same time, the social rulebook of the EU still does not sufficiently address the structural cause – the lack of sufficient housing at a reasonable cost. What is more, solutions to homelessness, such as Housing First, are also in dire need of more social housing to be able to function properly.

The potential of political decisions that could create a unique opportunity for Member States and the EU to overcome social exclusion and invest in social, cooperative housing is greater than we think. In fact, culture and art can get us through quite a lot, even homelessness.

Minutes after the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen announced the new EU "platform for experimentation and connection, fostering collaboration across thinkers and doers who want to design our future ways of living together," hundreds of online searches showed the nuts and bolts of the 'Bauhaus' movement. To describe the original idea with a few words, Bauhaus started as the ambition to benefit from quality, aesthetic housing that should be accessible to all. A second quick search of the vision of public,

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cooperative and social housing providers shows that at the core is the “access to decent and affordable housing for all in communities which are socially, economically and environmentally sustainable and where everyone is enabled to reach their full potential.”

Isn't the New European Bauhaus an opportunity to have post-COVID social housing that also helps to decrease the number of 700,000 people in Europe who sleep rough every night? The initiative can certainly deliver what it promises because the mix of inclusive, beautiful, affordable housing with thriving communities is something we see developed by Housing Europe members daily.

Up to 15% of the housing stock owned and managed by the members of the Irish Council for Social Housing (ICSH) is occupied by formerly homeless households. This reflects the fact that many housing associations in Ireland have initially started working with groups like homeless people, the elderly or people with disabilities, before later becoming registered providers of social housing. While Irish legislation gives priority to the most vulnerable to access social housing, the extremely high private rents in the country are creating a steady stream of households experiencing homelessness or experiencing housing related precarity. Thus, finding suitable housing in a timely manner remains a challenge for many.

The French l'Union Sociale pour l'Habitat has been working with state authorities to provide increased subsidies and grants for the delivery of housing for the most vulnerable people, which current financing structures in France make extremely difficult, especially in large urban hubs, where the costs of development are higher. USH members have played a leading role in the 'Housing First' (Logement d'abord) strategy in France as it has been rolled out over the past three to four years.

During the COVID crisis, the Austrian Federation of Limited-Profit Housing Associations (GBV) initiated a moratorium on evictions

(ahead of a later national ban), a system of rent deferrals and the provision of extra support to tenants to apply for financial support. All of this has been done with the aim of keeping people in their homes.

To create the much needed boost to the economy and help our communities recover from the shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European wave of renovations will need to 'factor in climate without pricing out people'. In this regard, the currently ongoing revision of the EU's Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (EPBD) and the EU Green Deal are two make it or break it moments.

Being part of the Renovation Wave Strategy, the New European Bauhaus must take on board the fact that how and where we live is correlated to the financialisation and commodification of housing. Housing is a basic human right and relatively new phenomena, such as short-term rentals in popular destinations that result in empty flats, should turn into places where our communities live in dignity. Undoubtedly, the governance of the initiative would need to bring social actors working on the ground and economists on board.

Investment in Europe's neighbourhoods is one of the truly safe bets that policymakers can make if they want anyone in our communities to thrive. Channeling the necessary funding to avoid unintended consequences on affordability and citizens. Coming back to the potential of the European Pillar of Social Rights to be a true guiding principle of EU policies, the set up of an 'EU Post-COVID Social & Affordable Housing Expert Group as part of the Social Pillar action plan' that brings ministries, cities, stakeholders together to see how our housing systems help meet those objectives, linking it to Bauhaus and the Affordable Housing Initiative under the Renovation Wave can make sure that these initiatives have a clear social stamp mainstreaming the goal of reaching decent housing access to all.