
New European Bauhaus: the proposals of l'Union Sociale pour l'Habitat

1. Introduction

France's social housing bodies manage a total of 4.6 million housing units, spread out across France, and house around 10 million people. Every year, on average, they build 75,000 new housing units and refurbish 120,000 existing ones.

In France and in Europe, the social housing players, in their various forms, have always taken been willing to take bold steps forward to propose innovative responses to the economic, social and environmental issues that our European societies have had to face up to, with one common ideal always foremost: to ensure better living conditions – and therefore better lives – for their tenants.

Thanks to its long tradition of experimentation, the social housing sector has often acted as an incubator of architectural and social innovations. It is often 'ahead of the curve', which is currently the case in such fields as energy issues, construction processes, low-emission approaches and the circular economy.

Having been committed for a long time to improving energy performance of their housing stock, the social housing bodies have significantly accelerated the pace of thermal renovations over the past 10 years. Since 2016, they have been building new, low-emission housing units. An initial experimental phase enabled them and continues to enable them to assess the technical feasibility and economic sustainability in order to grasp the complete life cycle of a low-emission building. This approach is due to be extended to all new construction projects.

The social housing bodies are also committed players in the fields of architectural quality, in maximising the liveability of the housing units that they build, manage and refurbish. The size of the buildings, the way they fit into the cityscape and the landscape, their typology and their organisation, are the outcome of extensive consultation and experimentation processes that have been ongoing for many years, with the aim of adapting these practices to the requirements of the inhabitants. The social housing bodies are also keen to enable architects, engineers, landscape gardeners and planners of all generations to play a part in their projects. These have thus become fertile grounds for experimentation, that eventually give rise to new common practices in the bodies involved, at times spearheaded by achievements in specific communities, or as part of experimental projects run by Union Sociale pour l'Habitat, Caisse des Dépôts and even the State, as was the case, a few years ago, with the "Architecture de la transformation" project (see box), which drew its inspiration from various innovation processes to accelerate the development of environmental architectural projects for social housing throughout the country.

The idea is to experiment both in terms of the technical, architectural, usability aspects, and the legal and contractual aspects.

The "Une architecture de la transformation" project

Giving rise to new innovative and concrete solutions, whether architectural, technical or organisational, for social housing and low-cost housing, that can be reproduced by others: that was the aim of the "Une Architecture de la Transformation" programme, launched in 2015 and 2018. The operators of social housing that were shortlisted to

take part in this call for projects benefited from technical, legal and financial assistance to help them with their projects. Over a period of 9 months, they were able to test their solutions in order to integrate them into their projects – whether construction or renovation – and to validate the terms of their wider adoption.

USH wishes to focus its action on this culture of innovation at the service of the quality of life of the inhabitants.

The social housing bodies as players in the social sphere

The social housing bodies house a growing number of households that are affected by increasing economic and social vulnerabilities; more and more tenants of social housing have low and unstable incomes, and there is an increase in the proportion of tenants with social issues linked to isolation, ageing, handicaps, health problems, including mental health problems, who face major risks to their livelihood, health and family life. Over the past few years, we have seen an increase in vulnerable, single parent families. Beside their main vocation of managing real-estate assets, the social housing bodies are players in the social sphere, and are often called upon by the various partners in this sphere to provide solutions to the problems encountered by their tenants and to arrange accommodation for new entrants. Their real-estate strategies are significantly affected by these trends. This was brought to light and exacerbated by the pandemic over the past few months.

The social housing bodies as operators of neighbourhoods

The social housing bodies accompany the changes and the needs of each community, be it in urban environments (large cities, medium-sized and small towns), semi-urban and rural settings, whether attractive or otherwise. They are key partners of local authorities, being involved in such projects as urban renewal of neighbourhoods and of inner cities.

2. The values of the New European Bauhaus and of social housing in France and in Europe

Creating durable, beautiful and inclusive projects, these are the values conveyed by the New European Bauhaus project, and these values are shared by the social housing bodies, like a break-even point to be attained that echoes the triad of fundamental values underlying architectural quality, namely long-term viability, usability and form. This approach also fits in with a three-pronged set of demands and expectations: habitability, quality, and long-term viability of structures and their propensity to fit into their environment. All of these key aspects result in a unique balancing act for each project, which is a function of its temporality, budget and operating environment.

The prime mission of the social housing bodies is inclusiveness, as they house the most economically deprived households in a bid to foster their social and spatial inclusiveness. With tenants of limited means who are often also ageing and affected by handicaps, inclusiveness is the core concern of social housing bodies. As builders and accountable players at the vanguard of public policies, they have integrated sustainability and energy performance, and are committed to carbon neutrality and the preservation of biodiversity in both their construction and refurbishment projects and their management activities. These aspects are increasingly technical, and require ever more new and cutting-edge skills. But these new social challenges, these new technical vocations, do not cause the social housing bodies to lose sight of the need for quality pure and simple, and the need to procure tenants a decent living environment. All these interlocking considerations, which were the subject of an intense reflection and consultation process during a study that we spearheaded with Caisse des dépôts and the social housing bodies, enabled us to determine that a given aspect might become preponderant and upset this harmonious balance, if one were to place too much emphasis on sustainability, for instance. Just like the social housing bodies, we believe it is important to continue to build on these three fundamental pillars, and the New European Bauhaus project largely echoes this concern.

3. Points requiring further action that we would like to expand upon within the scope of the New European Bauhaus for the social housing sector

Their proximity to their tenants, their capacity for technical and social innovation, their commitment to the stakes of carbon neutrality and energy efficiency, the importance of inclusiveness and accessibility in all their actions, and their determination to maintain detailed oversight and a firm guiding hand in all their projects, make the social housing bodies fully-fledged players in the New European Bauhaus.

Here are the issues on which we want to work within the scope of the New European Bauhaus project:

Construction and refurbishment, architectural stakes and quality of life should all be complementary considerations

- **Turning refurbishment projects into beautiful**, architecturally notable, valued and valuable, constructive and attractive projects that completely renew the entire approach to these operations

Finding ways to better refurbish, transform, regenerate, lend a second life in terms of sustainability, functionality, aesthetics. Finding ways to bring onboard the inhabitants, the site managers, the contractors as part of this process, and encourage the development of local ecosystems.

Refurbishing housing assets while taking into consideration the various urban challenges at hand. Finding ways to significantly improve the housing stock. Finding ways to determine and control the costs and the means involved.

- **Reworking our approach to construction with the various players involved to meet the challenges of sustainability, inclusiveness and attractiveness**

Finding common stakes, specific areas of improvement, bolstering the best practices of construction and refurbishment, finding new ways of enhancing the impact of projects.

What kinds of housing units, for what lifestyles, with what links to local and remote environments?

- **What housing organisations and practices to foster in what environments:** urban, suburban, rural, overseas territories...
 - What of the environments and the relationships between these environments? How does one reinvent the relationship between rural and urban communities, what elements of complementarity does one play on, in a spirit of attaining a circular economy (in terms of materials, agriculture/food, energy production)?
 - What of the immediate surroundings? Access to nature, services, the town centre (the 15-minute city, etc.)?
 - What will be the impacts of the changes in these local environments on the organisation of social housing projects?
- **Actions to be taken**
 - Finding ways of reworking the layout of social housing units in light of the changes and new organisation of the surroundings and of people's lifestyles: telecommuting, mobility, ageing, the need to house young people. Determining what additional services need to be provided, how social housing units should be organised to provide a decent living environment for the most economically deprived members of society, and to mirror the latest demographic and social changes. Working out what the housing units of tomorrow should be like, and what their surroundings will be like.

- “Universal”, generic housing versus unique and differentiated housing: How does one break the shackles of common practice and tradition in housing while maintaining a universal and sustainable vocation?
- What about collective spaces? Shared spaces, shared environments, etc.?

What housing units, for what lifestyles, in what surroundings?

- **Determining what sensitive links to foster between housing and the outdoors and nature**

Enhancing people’s well-being in housing: internal comfort and links to the exterior through enhanced air quality, warmth, freshness, acoustics, light and brightness, the quality of the materials used, and privacy within one’s home.

What of the relationship between housing units and nature around them?

How to strengthen the link between housing and nature, whatever the location? How to foster biodiversity?

How does the choice of materials, technologies (machinery, digital technologies, etc.) integrated into housing, contribute towards fostering accessibility for all and quality of life while preserving the environment?

Actions to be taken

- Finding ways to mobilise the imagination of the inhabitants and members of the building trade, such as designers, over these issues, through visits, working with artists, co-design workshops, etc.
- Finding ways in which refurbishment help us to rethink housing so as to reflect changing lifestyles. These are major stakes that need to be addressed in all communities with the help of the building trade ecosystems (development of skills and know-how, etc.) and adapted financing solutions.
- Financially enhancing the local impact of these operations to foster local green approaches by taking into consideration externalities such as low-waste building sites, the emergence of local green supply chains, etc.

What materials and what construction methods?

- Rethinking the ways of building and the materials used, in an approach combining aesthetics, low-emissions and sustainability, using recycled, environmentally friendly and locally sourced materials with a low carbon footprint and traditional materials with an improved carbon footprint, in a constant quest for attaining the precepts of the circular economy...

Actions to be taken:

- Developing local skills: site management, foremen, contractors, inhabitants, local authorities, regions, etc.;
- Mapping resources and skills;
- Finding aesthetic ways of using new materials. Finding out how to promote a variety and a diversity of materials that are adapted to local constraints, accessible for all, and long-lasting;
- Using quality materials for housing;
- Determining the best uses of technologies and in particular digital technologies.

What roles, and for what players? From Design to Industry, not forgetting workshops, site managers and contractors

Organising the supply chain and fielding different types of contracts to suit all kinds of players, whatever their size, in order to meet the challenges of this transition.

- Developing new, low-carbon, aesthetic and accessible approaches to construction and refurbishment, analysing the organisations that are involved and the most suitable contractual arrangements, and attempting to find answers to the following conundrums: should elements be built onsite or off-site? With what materials? Using what contractors, what tradesmen? Under what kinds of contractual arrangements? What iterations can be established between the various players involved, to create a genuine synergy and cooperation between them?
- From Design to Architecture: how can industrial concerns and designers come up with new ways of working together in order to be more environmentally sound, without falling into the pitfalls of the mass-industrialisation processes experienced from the 1970s onwards? What kind of elements might be involved: integrated, removable partitions, prefabricated façade elements, photovoltaic panels, structural elements? We need to find ways of enhancing the integration of architectural aspects into the industrialisation process, in order to improve the ergonomics of dwellings.

Actions to be taken:

Whereas industrialisation appears to be one of the solutions, many questions remain about its economic viability. It is necessary to bring the entire supply chain onboard in order to propose economically viable solutions, and then to measure the secondary benefits, if any: less nuisance, quality of implementation, speed of implementation, etc.

Any proposals that are made must take the inhabitants into consideration to ensure the suitability of the expectations and the solutions.

4. How can the experimental projects of the New European Bauhaus be applied to the social housing sector in France?

USH wishes to propose several projects, at the design or planning stage, to be conveyed by social housing bodies wishing to work on one of the issues mentioned above, across a wide variety of different environments (dense and attractive urban centres, suburban environments, rural settings, and France's overseas territories), so as to end up with a wide variety of proposals anticipating local adaptations of the new Bauhaus. To assist and capitalise on these experimentations, to adapt them, to imagine possible adaptations, to foster their wider acceptance and adoption subsequently, two groups might be set up to shadow and assist these demonstrators, to take part in identifying the hindrances and obstacles at hand, and to foster the dissemination of the projects at both the national and European level:

- **A think tank** consisting of qualified personalities from a variety of backgrounds, both French and European: architects, engineers, designers, "young rising stars", academics, building site and contract managers, institutions, intellectuals, artists, and locals. This body will assist the social housing bodies in their projects and will in parallel conduct a consultation process on the ways of attaining the aims of the new Bauhaus project in France, and at the same time, foster a broad dissemination of the experiments.
- An operational **technical committee**, consisting of trade bodies and syndicates, either involved directly in the demonstrators' teams, or in the themes of the New Bauhaus, and wishing to play a part in charting new approaches for French social housing bodies, in order to enable the widespread dissemination of the technical, legal, financial and aesthetic considerations of the demonstrators and projects under way.

- The demonstrators may thus rely on the backing of a community of professionals in tackling these issues in order to foster the widest possible dissemination and adoption of the new business practices.

What do we want from Europe?

- Assistance with the experiments, including backing in the form of project engineering (technical, financial, legal, steering) that is adapted to the stakes at hand with the New European Bauhaus
- Assistance with the experimentation and prototyping requirements
- A dialogue at local, national and European level in order to enable the identification and removal of any legal, technical and financial hindrances
- Backing or organising operational exchanges between European landlords

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