# Innovative Urban Planning:

## Insights from Affordable Housing Strategies and Urban Data Platforms

The recent Urban Planning Cluster visit to Barcelona on November 4-5, part of the EU-funded IURC-NA programme, brought together 14 cities from Europe, Canada, and the USA for a focused, thematic event. Over two days of intensive collaboration through field visits, discussions, and participation in the Smart City Expo, participants addressed two critical urban challenges: affordable housing and urban data management. They explored innovative solutions and shared best practices summarized in key takeaways.

### Affordable Housing, Shifting the Paradigm

Affordable housing is a shared challenge across North America and Europe, as it plays a crucial role in promoting social equity, economic stability, and community well-being. Cities face rising property prices, growing populations, and limited housing supply, making it difficult to ensure accessible, affordable homes for all residents. Addressing these challenges requires innovative approaches to balance development with inclusivity, ensuring that urban areas remain vibrant, resilient, and liveable for diverse communities. This approach and the experiences tackled during this visit are aligned with the housing component of the <u>Urban Agenda for the EU</u>'s objective to address affordable housing through knowledge creation and funding conditions to invest in new and renewed affordable housing.



Promoted by AMB - IMPSOL
Project: Peris + Toral Architects

### <u>Metropolitan Area of Barcelona (AMB)-IMPSOL</u>ᵢ: Community-Centered, Adaptative and Sustainable Housing Solutions

**1. Collaborative Planning with Municipalities**
AMB works closely with municipalities from the start, sharing project plans and seeking their input. This makes the municipality feel invested in the project. The municipality also decides who will occupy the housing, ensuring alignment with local needs.

**2. Flexibility, Adaptability, and Gender Perspective in the Design**
To adapt to changing demographics over time. Whether housing for young people today or elderly residents in the future, the design allows for adjustments in unit sizes and uses, making it sustainable and responsive to evolving community needs. It also includes gender-sensitive design, providing equal-quality workspaces within homes (work or domestic tasks).

**3. Community and Intermediate Spaces**
The importance of communal spaces where residents can gather, especially for those who may feel vulnerable or isolated. These spaces promote social interaction, safety, and a sense of belonging among residents.

**4. Bioclimatic Design is a Priority in the Investment**
Projects integrate bioclimatic principles, creating energy-efficient buildings while encouraging residents to live responsibly. The priority is to invest in high-quality elements with a high impact

on energy efficiency and reduce other costs linked to internal functionalities.  Key aspects of the design include:

- **Cross-ventilation:** All units are designed for natural airflow, improving comfort and reducing reliance on active cooling systems.
- **Public and communal spaces:** The layout fosters social interaction and community building through strategically designed public areas.
- **Thermal inertia:** Construction materials, such as ceramic facades, help maintain stable indoor temperatures, reducing the need for heating and cooling.
- **Energy-saving features:** Passive solar systems and careful insulation  improve efficiency, ensuring low energy consumption for residents.

These bioclimatic principles support the <u>European Green Deal's</u> decarbonization objectives by focusing on energy-efficient buildings.

### 5. Financial Sustainability
IMPSOL has a 150M€ credit from the European Investment Bank, which may be used only for social housing rental developments. They receive disbursements of 25M€ for groups of developments and must return the loan in 3 years. When IMPSOL owns the land, it can develop affordable housing for rent. Housing is kept affordable by ensuring rent is capped at 30% of residents' incomes. Those without sufficient income must seek support through social services.

Design is prioritized through a fixed-price competition to ensure quality, while construction is awarded through standard tenders (lower price). The entire process, from promotion to construction, can take up to four years.

The AMB-IMPSOL   experience is changing the paradigm of how affordable housing must be understood as a tool to change behaviours. With this transformative view, the projects support the philosophy of the <u>New European Bauhaus</u>, achieving the Green Deal objectives by transforming lifestyles and therefore societies into more sustainable, inclusive, and aesthetic environments.



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## The Basque Country [ii] Housing Policy: Affordable Housing as a Right.
### Research-Driven Industrialized Construction

### 1. Affordable Housing as a Right
The Basque Government's Social Housing Pact views housing as a fundamental right. Its long-term goal is to increase the availability of two types of housing: affordable rental housing, which cannot be rented above 30% of the tenant's income, and VPOs (Vivienda Protección Oficial), protected housing that must be kept permanently affordable for low-income groups and may not be resold at a market rate. This reflects a solid commitment to ensuring housing for vulnerable groups and the middle class.

This fundamental principle is aligned with the <u>Revised European Social Charter</u>, where  The Right to Housing (Art. 31) incorporates the foundation for a right to adequate housing.

### 2. Industrialized Construction to Address Demand
The industrialization of construction is central to the Basque approach. Prefabricated housing modules built in factories allow for faster, more cost-effective construction, addressing the pressing need for affordable homes.

### 3. Innovative Collaboration with Industry
The BuildInn Cluster plays a key role in driving innovation across the construction industry in the Basque Country. They aim to modernize the construction process through digitalization (BIM methodology) and sustainable practices. This collaboration between the public and private sectors ensures that innovation in industrialized housing is aligned with the region's broader sustainability and economic competitiveness objectives.

### 4. Land Availability Challenges
Land availability is a significant obstacle, especially in one of the areas with the highest density in Spain. However, the Basque Government is actively collaborating with municipalities to streamline land access through initiatives like the Strategic Land Reserve and repurposing underused spaces for housing development.

### 5. Regulating Housing Costs
The 2023 national law allows municipalities to designate "stressed areas" where demand for housing exceeds supply, enabling rental price controls.

### 6. Energy Efficiency and Modernization
Nearly half of the Basque housing stock is old and energy-inefficient. The government focuses on renovating and modernizing these homes to improve energy efficiency, supporting green economy goals, and creating new jobs in the construction sector. This objective supports the EU's green transition and the goals outlined in the <u>Renovation Wave</u> Strategy under the European Green Deal.

### 7. Encouraging Rental Market Participation
To increase the availability of homes for rent, the government is considering tax policies and incentives for property owners. If owners keep properties off the market, higher taxes could be imposed to encourage renting, aiming to unlock unused housing stock.

## The New York City Housing Authority [iii]: Securing Affordable Housing through Community-Driven Renovation (PACT)

**1. Funding Gaps and PACT**
The PACT programme responds to the federal government's inadequate funding for public housing. Converting buildings into Section 8 housing enables private financing for repairs while maintaining tenant protections.

**2. Community Engagement and Tenant Rights**
Residents retain key rights, such as paying only 30% of their income toward rent, receiving relocation assistance, and having the right to return after any temporary relocations due to renovations. Tenant protections align with EU values of inclusion and equity in urban development, as emphasized in the New Leipzig Charter.

**3. Security and Accessibility Challenges**
NYCHA's investment in security, such as installing 24/7 security cameras and upgraded access control, aims to address safety concerns in specific neighbourhoods. Additionally, the growing senior population in public housing presents accessibility challenges.

**4. Land and Land Reuse Development**
NYCHA is exploring redevelopment on its land, using underutilized spaces for new affordable housing. This strategy, combined with private-public partnerships, helps expand housing options without displacing current residents.

**5. Public-Private Partnerships for Funding**
NYCHA funds development and repairs through federal, city, and state funding, supplemented by conventional bank loans and tax credits. This highlights the importance of diversified funding sources for public housing initiatives.

## Urban Data: Unlocking The Power of Open Data for Urban Planning

Urban data management is becoming increasingly critical as cities grow more complex and interconnected. It is a core topic in the European Data Strategy, which promotes open data to enhance decision-making and service delivery. With vast amounts of data generated daily from various sources—such as transportation systems, environmental sensors, and public services—cities face the challenge of effectively integrating, managing, and utilizing this information. Historically, data has been stored in isolated silos across different departments, limiting its potential for city planning and decision-making. To overcome this, cities are moving towards integrated data platforms that unify diverse data streams, making them accessible, transparent, and usable across multiple sectors. The experience of Hamburg supports the alignment with the Urban Agenda for the EU Partnership on Digital Transition (Hamburg is one of the members), aiming to provide better public services to citizens, support European cities in exploiting the possibilities of digitalisation, and help European businesses to develop new innovations and create new business opportunities for global markets.

## Urban Data Platform Hamburg: Enabling Integrated Data Exchange to Improve City Services and Support Decision-Making

**1. Data Integration and Standardization**
To overcome silos in data systems, Hamburg's platform uses standardized APIs to enable integration across different departments and stakeholders. This allows data to be accessed easily, regardless of the software each department uses, ensuring a smoother flow of information and facilitating innovation.

**2. Data Governance and Quality Control**
Establishing a clear data governance structure is essential. Each department should be accountable for the quality of its data. A data catalogue can help ensure that data is properly organized, well-documented, and easily accessible, helping to address challenges with inconsistent data quality.

**3. Balancing Transparency with Privacy**
While the transparency law mandates public data sharing, the platform must balance openness with privacy and security concerns. Sensitive data must be protected, but clear policies should be developed to maximize transparency without compromising security.

**4. Collaboration and Stakeholder Engagement**
Collaboration between departments and external stakeholders is vital for the platform's success. Regular workshops, cross-departmental meetings, and external collaborations ensure that the platform evolves in response to user needs and fosters better decision-making and planning across the city.
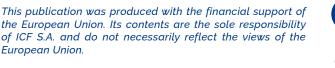


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[i] The Barcelona Metropolitan Area (AMB) is the public administration of the metropolitan area of Barcelona, which occupies 636 km² and encompasses 36 municipalities with more than 3.2 million inhabitants. AMB exercises competencies in land and housing policies, among others, through the Metropolitan Institute of Land Development and Property Management (IMPSOL).

[ii] The Basque Country is one of the 17 Autonomous Communities (regions) in Spain in addition to the two autonomous cities of Ceuta & Melilla. It includes the provinces of Alava, Gipuzkoa and Vizcaya which include worldwide recognized Green Capital Vitoria-Gasteiz, also member of the IURC network.

[iii] The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), is the largest public housing authority in North America providing affordable housing for low- and moderate-income New Yorkers. NYCHA is home to 1 in 17 New Yorkers, providing affordable housing to 528,105 authorized residents through public housing and Permanent Affordability Commitment Together (PACT) programs, as well as Section 8, which provides rental housing assistance to low-income households.

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Learn more about IURC NA

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