Empty Spaces to Homes (ESTHer): Revitalizing Vacant Spaces into Affordable Housing

Submitted By: Habitat for Humanity International – Europe and the Middle East



Organization Profile

Organization Name: Habitat for Humanity International – Europe and the Middle East

Organization Type: Civil society

Website: https://www.habitat.org/emea

Practice Details

Country(ies): United Kingdom, Poland

City(ies): N/A

Start Year: 2024

Ongoing: Yes

End Year: N/A

Main Adequate Housing Components:



Housing Thematic Areas:

- Housing Affordability & Financing
- Housing Rights & Social Inclusion
- Housing & Climate Mitigation
- Housing Policy, Legislation & Governance

Relevant SDGs:



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Problem & Context

Across Europe, millions face housing insecurity due to rising costs, energy poverty, and insufficient social housing. Over 39 million people cannot afford adequate homes, while 1.2 million have none at all. The building sector generates 36% of Europe's CO_2 emissions - more than all transport combined - yet 46 million homes stand vacant, often near infrastructure, jobs, and services. Repurposing these could save up to 85% of embodied carbon compared to new builds. However, existing housing and urban policies, together with prevailing sector practices, prioritize new construction and overlook circular and adaptive reuse. This reinforces both the affordable housing crisis and the built environment's excessive emissions. The Empty Spaces to Homes (ESTHer) initiative addresses these challenges by developing and demonstrating scalable solutions to convert vacant spaces into affordable, energy-efficient, and healthy homes.

Solution Developed

The initiative addresses Europe's housing affordability crisis and the environmental impact of new construction by transforming vacant and underused buildings into affordable, energy-efficient, and healthy homes - offering an alternative to continuous new building. It develops housing solutions based on adaptive reuse, providing homes for vulnerable groups (low-income households, people on social housing waiting lists, elderly and young). Activities include cross-country research on social housing and vacant-building landscapes, demonstration renovation projects, development and testing of innovative financial models, and targeted policy advocacy.

Its innovation lies in integrating environmental, technical, social, financial, and institutional dimensions when developing affordable housing solutions: life-cycle-based carbon-footprint methodology; participatory co-design with local authorities, sector stakeholders (national coalitions and EU-level Community of Practice on Affordable Housing); new financial and policy mechanisms that position building reuse as a driver of social inclusion and climate neutrality; communities engagement; and volunteers engagement on demo builds.

Implementation

Actions implemented run mostly in parallel. Baseline studies in Poland, Great Britain, Hungary, and Croatia analyzed social housing and vacant-building landscapes, identifying barriers and opportunities. National Coalitions (Poland, GB) and an EU-level Community of Practice on Affordable Housing were established to engage stakeholders and co-create solutions. A Life Cycle Assessment (LCA)-based carbon-footprint tool was developed, aligned with EU Taxonomy and Level(s) standards. Demonstration renovations ("demo builds") converted vacant tenements into affordable, energy-efficient homes. Financial and governance models, including Social Rental Agencies (SRAs), have been developed and tested. Advocacy and communication campaigns influenced housing and climate policies and mobilized citizens and sector actors.

Actors involved include HFHI Europe and Middle East (lead coordination); Habitat offices in Poland, GB (local execution); research and technical partners (Periféria, ENOVA, Urban Development Consultants, LSE, IBS, etc.); municipalities, NGOs, financial institutions, private developers, and community groups through National Coalitions and the Community of Practice.

The initiative is funded by the Laudes Foundation with co-funding from M&G, VKR Employee Foundation, and local partners. Resources combine grants, partner contributions, and public–private collaboration, ensuring financial resilience and stakeholder ownership.

Enablers & Obstacles

One of the key enablers of ESTHer is the current EU policy momentum - with the Affordable Housing Action Plan, Renovation Wave, European Green Deal, and New European Bauhaus placing affordable housing high on the political agenda. ESTHer translates this momentum into practice and demonstrates how adaptive reuse of vacant buildings can deliver affordable, low-carbon homes. Implementation is supported by the main partners' funding, partnerships and collaboration established through national coalitions (Poland, UK) and a Community of Practice on Affordable Housing.

Results & Impact

This housing practice has:

- Influenced housing and climate policy discussions at both national and EU levels, contributing to the ongoing Affordable Housing Action Plan and the recognition of adaptive reuse within the Renovation Wave and Green Deal.
- Conducted comparative research in Croatia, Hungary, Poland, and Great Britain, mapping the social housing and vacant-building landscapes and documenting barriers and enablers for reuse.
- Developed new financial model for converting empty buildings into affordable housing, a Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) framework and tool for measuring embodied and operational carbon, and created national coalitions and a European Community of Practice to ensure lasting collaboration.
- Currently conducting research mapping financial models and instruments across Europe.
- A key practical milestone was the demonstration renovation in Poland, successfully converting a vacant tenement building into affordable, energy-efficient homes, validating the approach and providing a replicable model for municipalities.

More than 70 organizations and municipalities joined project coalitions, contributing to development of sustainable affordable housing solutions - from financial model design, or innovative governance frameworks, to local implementation.

Replication & Scale Up

First piloted in Poland and the UK, the project is being replicated in Hungary and Croatia through baseline studies, mapping, and demonstration planning. Its success is driven by multi-stakeholder coalitions, adaptable financial and governance models, and strong policy engagement at local and EU levels. These elements enable replication across diverse urban contexts.

Scaling is planned through “Empty Spaces 50 Cities Vision,” aiming to engage 50+ European cities by 2026 in converting vacant spaces into homes. By combining research, demonstration builds, policy advocacy, and cross-sector collaboration (incl. existing and new partnerships), the project delivers a replicable toolkit to scale its impact across diverse European contexts. Stakeholder engagement structures, including national coalitions in the UK and Poland and a regional Community of Practice on Affordable Housing, were formed to foster collaboration, scale impact, and share knowledge.

Policy Uptake

This housing practice is a new or innovative practice that is not yet adequately or fully integrated into formal policy frameworks.

ESTHer operationalizes high-level EU housing concepts by translating them into concrete actions. It advocates for a common EU definition of “vacant real estate,” conducts research to map underused properties, and promotes their sustainable reuse. Through public consultations, bilateral meetings, and coalition work, ESTHer successfully contributed to the EU Affordable Housing Plan and cohesion policies. The consortium proposed amendments to the EU housing crisis report and national recommendations in Poland, turning conceptual EU goals into practical regulatory and funding measures.

Lessons & Takeaways

The ESTHer project builds on Habitat for Humanity’s proven model of transforming vacant spaces into homes, showcasing significant potential for scaling and replication. To expand its impact, ESTHer will implement pilot projects with demonstration builds, conduct research, and develop practical toolkits addressing legal, financial, and design challenges related to repurposing vacant spaces.