Habitar Program: Humanizing Social Housing in Lisbon

ACT**4**DYS

Background

Lisbon, like many European capitals, has struggled with urban housing challenges for decades. Legacy public housing buildings, often hastily constructed in the mid-to-late 20th century, gradually fell into disrepair. These estates became home to thousands of low-income residents, many of whom were elderly, migrants, or vulnerable families. In the face of rising rents, gentrification, and social exclusion, the municipal government recognised that upgrading public housing stock required more than just construction work - it demanded respect for the dignity, rights, and aspirations of the existing communities.

The **Habitar Programme** was launched by the Municipality of Lisbon in response to these needs. Unlike conventional approaches that prioritise rapid demolition or forced relocation, Habitar puts current residents' well-being and voice at the heart of the regeneration process. The program is based on a 'humanisation' principle: renovations and upgrades are carried out with minimal disruption, retaining families in their neighbourhoods while improving quality of life.

Specifically, Habitar starts each project by holding resident assemblies, ensuring tenants participate in decision-making about design, phasing, and support services. Work includes structural repairs better.

Insulation and windows, modernised kitchens, and bathrooms, and improved communal outdoor spaces. Importantly, vulnerable households — such as the elderly or people with disabilities — are provided tailored social support, including temporary accommodation if necessary, stress management, and access to legal or employment services.

Habitar has received broad praise not only for improving physical conditions, but also for enhancing social inclusion, reducing stigma, and combating the isolation or anxiety that often accompany urban regeneration. By 2024, dozens of estates and hundreds of homes have been renovated, with thousands of residents benefiting from a more dignified, stable living environment.

Key Activities

- Comprehensive physical renovations: thermal insulation, new windows and facades, renovated kitchens and bathrooms, and safer building entrances.
- Resident-first participatory planning through tenant assemblies and feedback mechanisms.
- Provision of tailored social support services for vulnerable residents.
- Upgrade of communal spaces, gardens, and shared facilities.
- Programs to prevent forced evictions during work, ensuring community stability.

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Impact

- Improved living conditions, energy efficiency, and safety for low-income households.
- Preservation of social networks and prevention of unnecessary displacement.
- Creation of inclusive, participatory governance in urban regeneration.
- Reduced stigma and greater neighbourhood cohesion.

Challenges & Solutions

Challenge: Renovating occupied homes without causing undue disruption.

Solution: Careful phasing of works, clear communication with residents, and provision of temporary accommodation or support as needed.

Challenge: Ensuring full participation and trust among resident communities.

Solution: Early and ongoing engagement through assemblies, transparency, and feedback systems.

Challenge: Funding comprehensive upgrades while maintaining affordability.

Solution: Municipal budget allocation supplemented by national/international funding and in-kind partnerships.

Tips for Similar Projects

- Prioritise resident participation at every project stage.
- Invest in both physical upgrades and social support for vulnerable groups.
- Avoid displacement - plan construction to allow staying in place when possible.

Tips for Similar Projects

- Build trust through clear communication, transparency, and responsive management.
- Combine urban renewal with programs addressing social inclusion, employment, and health.

Identified Limitations/Weaknesses

- Complexity and slower pace compared to 'demolish-and-rebuild' models.
- Requires sustained political will and funding.
- Risk of conflict or dissatisfaction if communication falters or expectations diverge.

Resources/Links

- Information about the Habitar Program can be found on the **official Lisbon Municipality website**

Partners

CARDET

Proportional Message

spectrum RESEARCH CENTRE

EUROPEAN DISABILITY FORUM