

# THE CHALLENGES AND SUCCESS STORIES OF SOCIAL HOUSING AROUND THE WORLD



# The Challenges and Success Stories of Social Housing Around the World

Rising real estate prices across the world have pushed many out of the market, with disadvantaged or low-income individuals and families struggling to afford the ever-rising rents. Social housing is designed to address this issue, having evolved in London at the turn of the 20th century and implemented across the world today.

But social housing is not without its challenges and a look at its history in different countries, together with what has worked (and what hasn't) offers an insight into this complex issue.

## WHAT IS SOCIAL HOUSING?



Social housing is basically affordable rental housing, specifically designed for those on low incomes. It may be provided by local government authorities or private housing associations, helping to assist those who cannot access accommodation in the private rental market. In many countries it serves as a remedy for the inequalities of housing, particularly in places where real estate prices are rising rapidly.

## THE PROS AND CONS OF SOCIAL HOUSING

Social housing is built on the idea of helping disadvantaged people find homes (which is undoubtedly a positive thing), with low-income families, those with disabilities and sometimes senior citizens benefiting. It gives those who might otherwise end up in unsafe or condemned buildings access to low-cost housing that meets building requirements and safety standards while making economical use of land and urban resources.

Most social housing is run by an authority who has a presence, handling repairs or concerns which residents may have and acting as a landlord would in private rental situations. But funding for social housing remains a serious issue, with a lack of money to deal with repairs resulting in rundown or outdated rentals. This also leads to understaffing to deal with resident concerns and the necessary maintenance requirements.

The lower rents associated with social housing help to increase the disposable income of its residents, but also stretch community resources. Often the cost of supporting social housing exceeds the taxes that its residents pay, which creates tension with others in the community.

Social housing is often subject to high crime rates, particularly those which are isolated from the surrounding communities. Lack of access to community facilities or other neighborhoods often leads to a build up of negative influences and a high concentration of drug use and violence. There is also often a lack of privacy due to the high density of social housing and indications that health conditions and educational performance are negatively influenced.

# THE HISTORY OF SOCIAL HOUSING

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Social housing has its roots in the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, with dramatic urban population increases resulting in often squalid conditions in cities across England. It was initially philanthropists who provided affordable housing in tenement blocks, with some factory owners following suit by building entire villages for their workers.

The Victorian village of Saltaire in England's West Yorkshire is one such example, built to house the workers of a textile mill and now a UNESCO World Heritage-listed site. After a Royal Commission report, the English Government began to take an interest, which led to the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1885. This gave local governments the ability to close down unhealthy housing or communities and encouraged them to improve the conditions within their areas and build suitable alternatives.

The world's first large-scale social housing project was built in London to replace the notorious

Old Nichol slum where child mortality rates were shockingly high. Known as the Boundary Estate, it was completed by the London County Council in 1900 and its success encouraged other local councils to follow suit.

The outbreak of First World War spurred the authorities further, with the poor physical health of urban conscripts leading to the “Homes Fit For Heroes” campaign. While social housing projects such as this were tested in other European countries and the United States during the 1930s, it wasn’t until after the Second World War that they became widespread.

## SOCIAL HOUSING AROUND THE WORLD

### UNITED STATES

The first social housing project in the United States was New York City’s “First Houses” which was part of an attempt to clear slums across the country. For every unit of public housing that was constructed, a unit of private housing was to be demolished, targeting unsanitary neighborhoods which were a source of disease and removing the sub-standard housing of colored communities.

One of the United States’ most unique social housing initiatives was the Mutual Ownership Defense Housing Division which operated as part of the Federal Works Agency between 1940 and 1942. It was designed to address the housing needs of defense workers and middle-class Americans using the cooperative/mutual ownership concept. The uncertain duration of defense workers’ employment and lack of savings made it difficult for them to secure home loans, and the project model was hoped to lead to a housing solution for other Americans.

But competing resource needs during World War II and the interests of real estate companies resulted in the project’s short-lived existence. Only eight housing projects ended up being built, with all but one eventually purchased from the government by their residents and continuing to operate today as mutual housing corporations.

In the United States, social housing has generally been built as part of the regeneration of older communities, with rents subsidized on the basis of income. Many now allow for tenants of mixed income levels, with both assisted and market-based renters living side-by-side. But a reputation for violence and drug use is still a challenge, with the 1996 federal “one strike you’re out” law enabling for the eviction of tenants convicted or tried for crimes.

## CANADA

In Canada, social housing has traditionally been in high-rise clustered developments within working-class neighborhoods, although purpose-built, easy-to-manage town house communities have also been constructed. In recent years, there is a move towards the integration of social housing initiatives with market housing, encouraging low-income residents to be connected with the greater community and an active movement to improve leisure and cultural amenities.

## BRAZIL



Brazil is famed for its favela slums, with high drug-related crime and violence, but there is a move to create safe and affordable housing that can eventually be purchased by its residents. The Brazilian government's Minha Casa, Minha Vida ("My House, My Life") is its social housing program, with the aim of building three million homes across the country for low-income families. It is financed by the Brazilian public bank, Caixa Econômica Federal, which also provides mortgages for qualifying homeowners.

## CHINA

In China, social housing is provided through a number of different sources, including the creation of new housing, in otherwise abandoned properties and in old apartments which are rented at a more affordable price. In other situations, free land and exemption from real estate developer fees are provided to low-income residents in what is known as Jing Ji Shi Yong Fang or “the economically applicable housing”.

Affordable housing for its citizens is one of the key components of China’s 12th “Five-year Plan”, with around 36 million homes to be constructed within that period by both the private and public sector. In the autonomous territory of Hong Kong, around half of the residents live in public housing which remains one of the major policies of its government.

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## EUROPE

Across Europe, social housing gained its biggest momentum following the First World War, with innovative municipal housing projects carried out across Germany, particularly between 1925 and 1930. Known as Siedlungen (“settlements”), they addressed the unsanitary living conditions of pre-war urban tenements, with residents provided access to light, air and sun. Most of these were low-rise, suburban apartments, initiated by the progressive-liberal policies of the Social Democrats.

In Austria, social housing has been a prevalent issue since the foundation of the Republic of German-Austria in 1918. It was spurred by a movement of less affluent people to the periphery of towns to grow food during a period of significant shortage. These Siedler (“settlers”) began organizing themselves into private social housing organizations such as the Austrian Association for Settlements and Small Gardens. Around the same time, the Social Democratic Party of Austria began erecting low-cost public housing, many of which have had an important influence on Vienna’s architecture since the 1920s.

In France, it was following World War II that social housing became a pertinent issue, with many cities damaged by war and an exodus of people from rural communities leading to rapidly increasing rental prices. In the 1950s, homeless rates were at an all-time high, with laws implemented to mobilize the construction of low-rent housing to address this issue.

While this did succeed in giving low-income families a place to live, it also resulted in the creation of suburban ghettos made up primarily of underemployed immigrants.

Unlike most European countries, social housing in Denmark and Sweden does not have income restrictions. It is generally administered by self-governing and non-profit organizations, as well as by the tenants themselves. In some areas, it has resulted in the creation of numerous “ghettos”, while in others the acquisition of publicly-owned buildings has created attractive urban areas for tenants with a mixed range of incomes and positive social outcomes.

## AUSTRALIA

In Australia, social housing is provided by both the state and federal governments in a mixture of low-density housing on purpose-built suburban estates, as well as high-rise, inner-city apartments in the bigger cities. But a booming property market has escalated the issue of affordable housing for disadvantaged communities, with relief housing for the homeless often being sold off due to its high real estate value and even young employed residents finding it harder and harder to purchase homes.

## CHILE



In Chile, a controversial social housing project has been created that sees low-income families being given half a “good” house as a starting point for them to build on. It was spurred by the idea of 1970s professor John F.C. Turner who believed that people can build for themselves and social housing should be conceived as an on-going project. This led to incremental building, with George Gattoni one architect who was particularly influential in the field and its goal of making good quality housing affordable.



Alejandro Aravena from Elemental has implemented this idea in a new master plan for the city of Constitución in Chile after it was devastated by a magnitude 8.8 earthquake in 2010 which destroyed around 80% of buildings. The idea was that rather than build housing blocks with small completed dwellings within the budget available, they would provide residents with enough to meet the Chilean legal requirements for low-income housing and allow them to expand the houses over time.

The result was residents being given half a “good” house which allows them to create a more appealing dwelling over time than what they would otherwise receive from state funding. Half the two-story houses in Constitución’s “Villa Verde” are identical and half are completely unique, with concrete foundations, plumbing and electricity supplied for families. Elemental runs building workshops and provides manuals which explain how the dwellings can be expanded using standard building materials, ensuring low-income residents can do so affordably.

While everyone hasn’t embraced the idea of building their own homes, the concept appears to be succeeding and Alejandro Aravena won the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2016. He was recognized for representing “the revival of a more socially engaged architect...fighting for a better urban environment for all.”

## LOOKING OUTSIDE OF THE SOCIAL HOUSING BOX



By addressing the challenges and success stories of social housing around the world, it’s clearly apparent that it is no easy task. Providing the housing itself is just one step in the process of creating healthy communities and a positive outlook for the future of low-income families. But as governments, private organizations and socially engaged architects continue to address the issue from different vantage points, some of the most exciting and successful ideas for social housing are from looking outside of the box.

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