SoHoLab guidelines for the regeneration of large-scale social estates

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SoHoLab guidelines for the regeneration of large-scale social estates

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About

In these 'Guidelines for Social Housing Living Labs' we bring together a series of recommendations and suggestions to improve regeneration actions, strategies, policies and plans for large-scale social housing estates. They are based on our experiences as action researchers in three national urban contexts (Brussels in Belgium, Milan in Italy and Paris in France) of large-scale social housing where we set up on-site investigations following a Living Lab approach. Living Labs originate in the exact and technical sciences and refer to experiments conducted in 'real life situations', testing appliances, concepts and innovations. Similarly, we conceive social housing living labs as academic research conducted in, with and for social housing estates and their residents in need of, or undergoing regeneration actions, strategies, policies and plans.

However, in these guidelines we want to look beyond the borders of academic research and our research context of large-scale housing estates. We have attempted to bring together a series of **recommendations** that are relevant for many actors in society who are concerned with improving the spatial and living conditions in urban neighborhoods and communities that face socio-economic or spatial exclusion (sometimes denoted as precarious, fragile or marginalized territories). So, these guidelines do not have the intention or goal to develop a blueprint or definition for Social Housing Living labs -we consider the **Living Lab** rather as **a means** for **successful regeneration practices** that take into account the **capacities and knowledge of residents and all actors** involved.

Therefor in the following 8 points, we compile suggestions for '**ways of doing**' that can hopefully inspire **policy makers** at various policy levels, **designers, urbanists, planners, architects, researchers, social workers** and **engaged citizens** who are in some ways involved in the regeneration of housing estates or other neighborhoods. These suggestions are meant to help them improve their practices and approaches.

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1. Stimulating spontaneous and informal encounters, while keeping an openminded perspective

1.1 Support an openminded approach that takes into account intersectionality

When planning activities, projects, policies and interventions in housing estates, keeping an open mind is a crucial attitude. As administrators, municipal authorities, social workers, planners or architects, we should be aware that we have preconceived ideas about the reality of such estates and their inhabitants. This is, in our view, an important prerequisite for any meaningful engagement that respects the concerns of local residents. Given the superdiverse contexts, we should consciously consider the various backgrounds and identities of residents and the various forms of exclusion and inequality that result from it. People can be excluded, and experience unequal treatment based on their **origin, religion** or **race**, their **gender**, their **age**, their **sexual orientation** or **physical disabilities**.

We should be aware of those risks of exclusion and investigate how this risk might play out in the space and the management of housing estates. Furthermore, the strategies, activities, projects and policies that we develop for housing estates and their inhabitants should always be screened to see if they **do not increase this risk of exclusion and inequality**.

1.2 Take time for a profound, open and multidisciplinary prior inquiry

For long-term spatial projects, scenarios or visions in housing estates a profound and open inquiry is essential. Such inquiry benefits from a multidisciplinary (and also non-disciplinary) approach and perspective both in terms of access to knowledge (understanding) and in terms of conceiving regeneration strategies (intervening). To really understand what is at stake, different disciplines are needed. Architects and urbanists have the skills to map **space** and **architecture**, as well as their history, while **planners** can understand current and past **plans** and **regulations**. Understanding how **residents use** and interact with the space they **inhabit** and how **institutions govern** the estate is equally important, calling for **sociologic** or **ethnographic surveys**. In short, it is important to select teams that combine these essential

skills, in order to be able to conduct a multidisciplinary inquiry that focuses on (but should not be limited to):

– the architecture, urban design and planning documents and policies;
– feedback sessions and collective brainstorming on on-site activities and call-for-projects;
– a consultation of landlord archives and procedures (such as former tenant petitions);
– in-depth interviews with relevant local and institutional stakeholders;
– behavioural mapping; and participant observations.

The multidisciplinary approach allows researchers or teams in charge of these enquiries to become important **intermediaries** and **reference persons** in the process of regeneration. It is important to guarantee that this knowledge remains accessible throughout the regeneration project. This can be achieved by keeping these teams on board and/or by finding means to share and anchor their knowledge among a larger group of stakeholders. Professionals from different disciplines are also more sensitive to the inclusion non-disciplinary, local knowledge into the inquiry process.

2. Develop a 'situated' unit

2. 1 Facilitate usage of (unused) spaces

Housing estates very often have temporarily unused spaces, such as **vacant commercial spaces** or **apartments waiting for renovation**. These spaces have the potential to accommodate a profound inquiry and interaction as described under point 1 on the site. Inviting a research team to set up office in such spaces or hosting an ethnographer as a temporary resident allows them to **experience the neighborhood from within**, crossing the public spaces, doing grocery shopping, using the laundromat, and/or contributing to activities of local community organizations. Such 'living labs', certainly if their presence is long-term, **immerse research teams in the neighborhood** and allow them to **become local actors**. They can participate actively and interact 'from the inside' with both other local actors and planning stakeholders, as well as take up roles in organizing or strengthening local initiatives or small-scale interventions.

2.2 Support in situ (university) research, learning and experimentation

Most important cities host higher education institutions that can **mobilize students and researchers** to engage actively with their host cities. Planners, estate managers and public officials should be aware of this potential while universities should promote their students and researchers to take up active roles in bringing knowledge to their city, as this creates an active learning and research environment that benefits their educational and research goals. Setting up a Living Lab is an excellent tool to promote action learning by the university. Research projects focused on action learning allow for **a long-term engagement with a site**, both studying and transforming policy design. Such research projects can **involve students of various backgrounds** (planning, architecture, educational sciences, journalism, sociology, ethnography, public management...) in different phases, for instance in doing in-depth interviews or developing research-by-design, immersing students in real-life contexts. This immersion in housing estates allows to question preconceived ideas and representations, and paternalistic or top down 'solutions'. This reinforces the ethical and political dimension in the training of professions that are regularly invited to 'intervene' in housing estates, such as architects and planners. Mobilizing research and teaching supports experimentation in Living Labs, to test tentative and speculative solutions. Although the work of bachelor or master students, trainees and/or

PhD researchers could be used to nourish the Living Lab, their involvement should be treated with caution, preventing to overburden inhabitants or local stakeholders, or to exploit the neighborhood for pedagogical purposes.

3. Look beyond accepted meanings of space and preconceived ideas about housing estates

3. 1 Be aware of multi-layered meanings of public space in housing estates

Many housing estates from the postwar era are built along the **prescripts of modernist architecture and planning**. They consist of **high or mid-rise apartment blocks set in a green and open space**. In most cases these open spaces are public, in others they are (legally) private but accessible to all. Since the 1970s these spaces have been **problematized** as they did not fulfill the promise of what modernist architects had expected of them. Over the years, cars have appeared and, in some cases, dominate these spaces. Various groups -according to age or gender- have made different uses of them. Some of the most visible 'uses', such as youngsters engaging in 'unwanted' activities such as drug dealing or vandalism, determined the perception of the estates as a whole. Urban riots and unrest have often played out against the background of these typical open spaces of the modernist housing estate, contributing to the negative perception.

This 'problematization' of space in the modernist estate has resulted in **recurring urbanist ideas** on how such space should be transformed. In many places (see the French example) the solution was sought in the **'privatization'** or **'residentialization'** of open space in estates by fencing them of and making them inaccessible to outsiders. Elsewhere (see the examples in Belgium and Italy), public spaces have been **collectivized** or **made inaccessible** as part of regeneration programs. Such approaches, that are often linked to problems of management, risk to push away existing uses and appreciations of these spaces that are less visible or known to planners, estate managers and architects. Upon closer scrutiny (see point 1.), **open space** in high-rise estates offers important **recreational** and **social-economic resources**, contributing to inhabitants' **identity construction** and/or fostering **socialization** and **social cohesion**. First, many inhabitants enjoy the green and calm outdoor spaces, albeit in a contemplative way, a type of use that is not very visible. Second, play grounds and gardens are important spaces for children and parents/child-minders, especially to cope with cohabitation

in little apartments; car parks or other open spaces are often converted into places to develop DIY activities or repair jobs. Still, it is important to bear in mind maintenance issues, such as problems of litter or conflicts about the management of certain public spaces between different owners. Yet, such problems are preferably tackled through **practical solutions, laying the responsibility with the actors in charge**, rather than by trying to come up with 'normative' solutions like inhabitant workshops on cleanliness.

3.2 Private dwelling space as the locus for thinking and experimenting participation

While participation is increasingly on the agenda in regeneration policies of public spaces in estates, it receives less attention in the renovation of dwellings. Nonetheless, the **private space of the home** is the prior and **primary concern of inhabitants**. Most often, clear communication about construction works often arrives too late or is even lacking. Before intervening in their private space, it is highly recommended to carefully listen to various concerns of inhabitants. In this respect, social assistants or concierges can play a key role, as they are generally in close contact to various inhabitants. Nonetheless, the crucial knowledge of these **'fieldworkers'** does not reach the architects and technicians responsible for renovation or maintenance work. Improving this exchange, for example by setting up **mixed teams of technicians and social workers** in planning renovations is advisable.

Similarly, unambiguous and continuous **information** should be provided on planned and ongoing renovation works. In case of renovation works where inhabitants remain in the building, a continuous presence, involvement and/or personal support by an assistant combining social and technical skills can support the relationships between inhabitants, construction workers and the social housing company. Such presence and support might be crucial for comforting inhabitants and promoting their wellbeing during the construction works, which are generally very intrusive. The collective dynamic created as part of such presence can lead to experiments for more direct forms of participation or negotiation during construction works.

4. Tie local experiences to the larger (institutional) context

4.1 Understand the network of actors in the area

While large-scale social housing estates are often very recognizable urban neighborhoods with uniform architectures and a unified layout and design of public space based on a single masterplan, they are often **managed and governed by a multitude of agencies** (local social housing landlords, national or regional social housing organizations, social services, NGOs etc.) **and authorities at various policy levels** (EU, national, regional, municipal). Their coherence as a recognizable part of the city with a separate and specific identity would benefit from an integrated approach, but its regeneration is dependent on diverse institutional actors and policy instruments.

When setting up actions, policies and strategies to regenerate estates, it is essential to **understand this network of actors**, their relationships, their mutual connections, competences, policies and potential contribution to the regeneration process. Such an inquiry should be part and parcel of any preliminary investigation of the context of housing estates. Moreover, teams responsible for conducting such inquiries can play an important role in ensuring knowledge exchange and creating links between the various actors. Sharing this 'geography' of actors with local residents can support them to understand how local governance works and how it can be addressed.

4.2 Have a specific attention to users, inhabitants and fieldworkers as preferred witnesses and translate their views to decision makers (and vice versa)

Many urban policies and regeneration programs are directed at large-scale housing estates. Equally, social tenants are subject to various, often well-intended welfare policies. However, the territory as well as the residents of housing estates very often appear as mere **'passive subjects'** or **beneficiaries** of such programs. These approaches neglect the potential to see territories and populations as actors that have the capacity to contribute to the design and conception of policies.

The key challenge then is to develop **methods to reveal** this knowledge and **potential that is embedded in the neighborhood**. Point 5. further develops prerequisites and methods for this local knowledge to be heard and incorporated. Recognizing and enhancing different expertise and voices

is a first step towards an urban **regeneration** which is more **collaborative** and well **adapted to local needs**. In case platforms of collaboration do not exist yet, Living Labs can serve as intermediaries between local inhabitants and planning actors, translating specific concerns and uses to institutional stakeholders, while explaining regeneration plans to local actors. Living Labs can also help to translate and adapt generic policies to make them better respond to local needs and to the characteristics of the context.

4.3 Open up the neighborhood to the city and regional level, by connecting to wider networks

Social housing neighborhoods often suffer from the **disconnection** and **separation** from the rest of the city and its opportunities. Urban regeneration, on the contrary, needs the combination and integration between different competences and expertise, at different levels. This could be done by creating or potentiating a **network of actors**, **internal** and **external** to the neighborhood, both on a **local** and a **metropolitan** level, who could bring to the neighborhood new resources and enrich the urban regeneration process and drive the change. Different kinds of collaborations and interactions should be put in place in order to build and reinforce its relationship with these actors

5. Reinforce local competences and have local voices heard

5.1 Be aware of power relations

The lack of inclusion of local knowledge in planning processes often results of an **unequal power distribution**. Authorities and estate managers, and the specialists they appoint are officially authorised to design and implement policies and interventions in estates. For these **'top down' actors**, this power is often self-evident.

First of all, for local voices and knowledge to be heard and incorporated in actions, plans and policies, it is important that we are **aware of our position of power**. Second, this imbalance of power can also be mitigated at a local level, by giving local actors and inhabitants insights in how planning processes work. By supporting spatial competences, such as reading and understanding maps, planning processes and technical documents in a learning-friendly environment we can **increase inhabitants' and local stakeholders' capacity to act and to recognize their own power**: to define their own spaces of action, to respond to difficult housing conditions or to react to ongoing regeneration processes. Moreover, the recognition of certain competences could also lead to **reinforce** the process of **co-design** and **co-creation** of projects and possible answers to shared problems. It is particularly relevant in contexts, such as large-scale social housing estate, where inhabitants have usually been seen as passive policy-targets.

5.2 Recognize, strengthen and integrate local competencies, by testing them in learning-friendly contexts

Large-scale social housing estates are often described as deprived contexts. Yet, they are also local **'tanks' of competences and social resources** that often tend to remain invisible. A SoHoLab firstly needs to identify **'bearers of competences'**, at different levels, in order to map the competences present in the field and highlight the ones that are missing and are needed to promote more effective regeneration processes. For instance, dwellers could be expert in repairing and recycling objects, which creates chances to develop a little local business but also to work on the issue of garbage recycling, promoting an 'ecological' culture. Some of these competencies need to be reinforced in order to generate positive impacts. But first of all, they need to be 'seen' and recognized as resources. All the different actors – inhabitants,

local organization, institutions – can bring competences to the processes. It is important to identify and enhance each one's possible contribution, not excluding more fragile segments of the population.

6. Streamline and diversify modes of representation and communication

6.1 Promote the co-construction of new images through various languages and media

For many years, participation processes are part of urban planning and renovation programs. However, many of the **participation methods** have **failed to** really **include** the visions, concerns and knowledge of **residents and local stakeholders**. Above, we have already highlighted that unequal power relationships play a role in this. Over the years, participation has often been reduced to mere **consultation** or **concertation** on plans and policies that were drafted 'top down'. In other cases, participation has been 'professionalized' in the sense that **intermediaries** intervene to **translate local concerns into planning processes**. These approaches raise important issues with regards to how representative these participation trajectories actually are.

We therefor recommend to apply methods for more **direct and diversified forms of representation** to collect and disseminate knowledge. New representation tools, such as **art**, **storytelling** or **community journalism** could bring new narratives and imaginaries of the neighbourhood, reshaping the attitude of authorities towards is.

6.2 Foster a better and diversified way to communicate research and policies

In **multilingual neighbourhoods** housing an important share of **illiterate people**, communication channels should be streamlined and diversified. M**edia** such as **posters**, **movies**, **Whatsapp**, **facebook**, **voice messages**, could help to better inform the neighbourhood about ongoing regeneration projects and works. Teams involved in planning and preparing regeneration actions, strategies, plans and policies should incorporate such methods in their inquiries and planning processes.

7. Find a balance between short-term action and long-term vision

7.1 Develop a joint vision, both for the short and the long term

Housing estates are usually governed by multiple authorities who might each develop renovation and regeneration plans, social inclusion projects or other actions and programs in the neighborhood. Typically for example, the renovation of homes can be the responsibility of the local social housing landlord, whereas public space might be managed and refurbished by the municipality. Separate renovation projects could target different buildings or even target different aspects such as the building envelope, the technical installations or the interiors of the home.

Given the multiple actors, programs and tools, and limited means to develop large-scale regeneration plans, **coherence** between these diverse types of intervention **is often lacking**. These different interventions each with their own temporality create insecurity and uncertainty among residents. For many local actors, it remains unclear which direction the transformation of the neighborhood will take.

Therefore, it is crucial to develop a **joint and overarching vision**, or at least a **framework** that allows to give a **perspective** for residents on the one hand and to situate projects and identify priorities by those governing the neighborhood on the other. Moreover, it is crucial to involve local actors and networks into the co-construction of this shared perspective concerning the most urgent field of intervention, the integration among different actions (social, economic, etc.). If it is important in every context, it becomes essential in the ones where a clear institutional policy of regeneration is lacking or where institutions tend to be more absent. There, bottom-up visions and shared actions become the engines for processes which are also able to recall for institutional responsibilities.

A shared vision allows furthermore to ensure the connection and integration among different fields (spatial, social, economic, etc.) which is only possible when the LL is able to involve the different actors in the co-construction of a planning vision. And finally, in large-scale housing estates that were designed and conceived under one masterplan or a combination of complementary execution plans, this is crucial to **safeguard** the **spatial and architectural coherence** of the ensemble over time.

7.2 Use the potential of small and temporary interventions carefully

In contemporary urbanism, small and temporary interventions are increasingly appearing as a means to kick start redevelopment, to announce renovation projects or to activate vacant or left-over spaces waiting for redevelopment. In territorial contexts with a lack of public investment, such **small** and **'frugal' projects** on public and shared spaces **can** truly **offer additional services, amenities** and **activities** that are missing and as such directly benefit estate residents. They can also be conceived as **pilot projects** that **'test'** a wider and more structural intervention. Their 'success' might encourage further public or private investment.

However, such interventions also create the risk of postponing necessary and more structural interventions. As is the case with other regeneration strategies or actions, it should also be clear whom these temporary and small interventions are benefitting. In some cases, they might be oriented primarily to those 'outside' of the estate, to create 'social mix' and simply readjust the image of the neighborhood.

Therefore, **small and temporary interventions** should **fit within a larger overarching vision** to ensure coherence among them. Ideally, they are conceived as steps in the development of a wider neighborhood (or even territorial) plan. As such, these projects become devices of interaction with local needs, while connecting it to the wider territorial context.

8. Create networks for ation and vision

8.1 Ensure a continuity over time through 'project chains' and anchored local stakeholders

Regeneration can benefit from slow urbanism, since a **situated regeneration process**, in which territories are carefully studied together with diverse planning stakeholders, **requires time**. However, the length of the process puts pressure on the need to maintain a shared vision with clear long-term goals for an integrated regeneration process (see 6.1). Therefore, methods should be devised to guarantee that goals and projects can be preserved over time.

First of all, it is important to identify which of the actors involved in the network (see point 4.1) is in the position to assure a **long-term engagement** with the site and the project. It is important that the key knowledge, goals and shared priorities of the project are 'anchored' with that stakeholder. Actors such as the municipality, the estate management or a regional housing organization could take up this role and appoint a **project coordinator** or **coordinating team**. Such a position -or even better, such a team- could be co-financed between several parties involved. In some cases, academic units and their universities who develop long term partnerships and engagements with neighborhoods can take up this role. In other cases, even if not leading the process, local networks of organizations and groups could be decisive for the improvement and success of such processes.

Second, there is the issue of **financing long-time regeneration** programs. While many funding programs and subsidies might exist at various policy levels, dedicated long-term financing mechanisms are very scarce or even inexistent. Therefore, it is necessary to design **'project chains'**, a combination of diverse sources of financing (European, national, regional, municipal subsidies or project calls, private foundations...) that converge into a wider vision, allowing **a continuity of action in the field**. This is a challenging task that furthermore underpins the need for long-term project coordination.

8.2 Develop a platform of exchange of all interested stakeholders

Considering the complexity of the policy and planning contexts in large-scale social estates, a wider vision for the regeneration of large-scale social estates should be co-constructed with the different stakeholders in charge. **Platforms of exchange** can be established to involve important planning actors of diverse planning levels, such as social housing companies, the region and municipality, as well as specific local actors, networks and inhabitants, strongly committed, and well aware of local concerns and needs. Such platforms, in the form of a 'physical space' or regular exchange meetings, can lead to **unexpected alliances and concrete strategies** for developing projects or constructing visions. The presence of both actors with expertise in social issues, such as social assistants and community workers, and technical issues, such as renovation works and planning policies, is crucial to discuss major priorities and financial resources in order to tackle them.

Such platforms also pave the way for **breaking barriers between different departments and policy levels** within specific planning offices and housing companies, sometimes barely communicating to one another. Moreover, platforms also assume the role of translating and bridging different sources of knowledge and expertise, which guarantees a clearer and hopefully more effective understanding of local dynamics. The university or other intermediary organizations such as an umbrella organization for social housing or other metropolitan or regional agencies could play an important role in creating and maintaining such platform. They have the benefit of being in a (more) neutral position as they do not have a direct stake. They do not have a particular authority or decision-making power over particular parts or aspects of the management of the estate. They can take up the **role of a 'broker'**. This can help the other stakeholders who might rather focus on their proper field of expertise or authority, making it difficult for them to 'zoom out' and to reflect on the interaction between diverse social and spatial projects within estates.

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