

Cities for all: when inclusivity is key for tackling climate challenge

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Figure 1. Image credits: [Espaço Municipal](#)

From the retrofitting of social housing blocks to the set-up of a “biodistrict”, co-designed by school pupils. When urban regeneration faces climate change from a new perspective: “Inclusive and beautiful is better. People must be proud of where they live”

Where once there were tanks, today there is a residential centre for the disabled, an art laboratory for people with mental health problems, a training centre for immigrants and ex-convicts, a restaurant, a hall for cultural events and a co-working space.

Of its military past, only the name remains: La Polveriera. Built in 1936 in the centre of Reggio Emilia for the maintenance of tanks and an ammunition warehouse, the two-building complex remained operational until the 1950s and were then gradually abandoned and closed to the public. In 2013, the municipality launched an ambitious programme for the renovation of the entire neighbourhood, focusing on a partnership with social cooperatives.



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“Today *La Polveriera* is a unique cocktail of social values-driven enterprises and social services that are now accessible in the centre of the city, and not – as often happens – left in the peripheral areas” explains Antonio Pisanò, director at Marcel Mauer Architecture and partner at Consorzio Stabile CAIRE, which have led the urban regeneration masterplan and design. “The Oscar Romero cooperatives consortium asked us to build a home to welcome fragile citizens, either physically, mentally or socially. Our objective was explicitly not to build a refugee centre, a hospital, nor a clinic” adds Antonio – “The design respects the original frugality of the structure, while at the same time creating an atmosphere of warm inclusivity for all the guests of the various social enterprises and NGOs. In the choice of materials and technologies, we opted for a mix of galvanised undulated steel, mild steel structures and cross laminated timber slabs and panels for floors and walls”.

“We have not only returned a space to the community, but we have also returned it improved”, Pisanò emphasises, explaining how *La Polveriera* has become **“a true reference for the regeneration of the whole Mirabello neighbourhood”**, helping with improved accessibility and higher safety and security.

How to bring different communities together was one of the topics discussed at this year [World Congress of Architects](#) in Copenhagen, dedicated to sustainable architecture. [Chris Downey](#), an American who has lost his sight but designs buildings with acoustics and accessibility in mind, was among the key speakers.

For him **inclusivity must be a priority in modern architecture:** “We, as architects, really play a profound role in making the environment inclusive. We are responsible for the physical environment but in those actions, **we can encourage and enable a full spectrum of people to participate**, to be in those environments, or either by our deliberate actions or our mistakes, **we can limit their access**. So just because someone can't walk into a building or someone can't see to navigate around through a building doesn't mean that they have nothing to contribute to design a space”.

But now that cities are confronted with the climate crisis, **is inclusivity consonant with sustainability?**

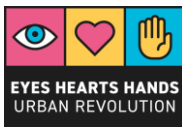
“So much of our climate future is wrapped up in how we build and what types of communities, **what types of cities, what types of structures, what type of environment we build”** Downey says. “We need to get our act together through these different concerns, to work together towards that collaborative goal of solving these significant challenging issues. And I'd like to inject the notion of **social sustainability and social resiliency** into this conversation, so that we should be leveraging all our human capital, all people, in planning the future.”

Several EU-funded projects across Europe are embracing the challenge to make our cities socially sustainable while advancing the green transition. The **project “[Eyes, Hearts, Hands](#)”** implements an initiative launched by the European Commission called the [New European Bauhaus](#), which **aims to promote more beautiful, sustainable and inclusive cities and towns across Europe**. The project aims to renovate seven districts across Europe, from Denmark to Italy, from Portugal to Turkey.

The city of **Maia on the outskirts of Porto in Portugal is one of the pilot districts**. Renovation will target energy poverty. According to the latest report by [Eurostat](#), around **ten per cent of Europe's population is at risk of energy poverty**, but in the metropolitan area of Porto, up to a quarter of those [surveyed](#) admitted living in discomfort in winter and not being able to heat their homes properly.



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Thanks to the project, **the Municipality of Maia will retrofit seven blocks in a larger complex of social housing from the 1970s**, situated in the centre of the city. **The retrofitting will follow the renovation of another 40 blocks already completed.** The involvement of the residents will be crucial for the success of the urban regeneration, according to the two project managers.

Ricardo Barbosa stressed that the buildings would be more energy-efficient but will also look more beautiful and more integrated with the surroundings. **“This is the ‘Eyes’ of the project,”** he explained, **“because we are completely changing how the buildings will look in the city”**. The blocks will have new ventilated façades with increased insulation, new windows, and photovoltaics panels will be installed on a renovated roof.

Moreover, giving a new face to the buildings will help **“to break the ghettoisation of these areas”** - adds his colleague Rogério Rocha: **“We want the residents to be proud of where they live**, in a more beautiful environment, and not to feel excluded from other parts of the city centre. **And this is the ‘Hearts’ part of the project,”** he says, adding that a series of cultural activities will be also organised.

The inhabitants are actively involved in giving a new shape to the public spaces of the areas by co-designing the plans, and **“this is the ‘Hands’ part of their project”**, concludes Ricardo, stressing that the project envisages a series of workshops to change behaviour in energy consumption. Barbosa and Rocha hope that this retrofitting will attract private investors for a further transformation of the whole social housing stock.

“Renovation should not only involve urban centres, but also rural areas” underlines Gabriele Roselli, project manager of another case study of the Eyes, Hearts, Hands project in Nepi, in central Italy. Here, the objective is to create **an energy community in an older town**, dominated by architecture from the 15th century.

Moreover, **Nepi is part of the ‘biodistrict’ of Via Amerina and Forre**, a network of 13 towns that have **committed to adopt sustainable development policies in agriculture, energy and tourism**. The renovation actions promoted by the EU-funded project are consistent with this commitment. Two buildings currently hosting the local health facility and a community centre, will be retrofitted and new solar devices will be installed respecting the historical heritage of Nepi.

As the area has a strong social value, the project is centred around community involvement. Stefano Converso, architect from University Roma 3, partner of the consortium Eyes, Hearths, Hands, explains that **“meetings were organised with pupils of the local primary school, inviting them to co-design the renovation of the neighbourhood**. All the proposed renovations will be discussed, taking into account the remarks of the local population that will use this space.”

In the true spirit of the New European Bauhaus movement, Gabriele Roselli, head of innovation and design at Rimond, partner of the Eyes, Hands, Hearts consortium, added that **these actions should stimulate new ways of financing urban regeneration**: **“If we understand the needs of the citizens of Nepi, and we involve them from the very beginning of the design phase, then we can imagine that people will be ready to contribute more financially to the further development of the town.”**

Other awareness-raising measures will include the questions of a better water resource use, better mobility and food production, concluded the professor Converso.



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As inclusivity is the focus of the Nepi team, new meetings are scheduled soon with elderly people in the town, with local business leaders and public officials. **The hope is that the positive experience of energy savings and urban regeneration in Nepi will inspire other towns in the biodistrict and nearby rural areas.**

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