Housing Justice Provocations Series

2025 Edition - Housing as an infrastructure for more sustainable, caring and fairer cities

Housing as infrastructure for more caring, fairer and sustainable cities and human settlements

HOUSING AS INFRASTRUCTURE

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FOR MORE CARING CITIES AND HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

FOR FAIRER CITIES AND HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

FOR MORE SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

Hub for Housing Justice

1 Introduction

Different continents, different languages, a single message. *Umhlaba, Izindlu, Isithunzi!* (Land, Housing, Dignity!) *A moradia é a porta de entrada para todos os outros direitos!* (Housing is the doorway to all other rights!) *Kolaborasi semua untuk hak atas hunian layak!* (Collaboration for the right to adequate housing!)

From Durban's shack settlements, to São Paulo's favelas or Jakarta's kampungs; across the world, millions of people want the same thing: housing for more caring, fairer and sustainable cities and human settlements. But how can housing achieve this?

In the lines that follow, we invite you to explore why housing is the infrastructure that cities and human settlements need to function, why housing is critical for social and ecological well-being, and why we must understand the fundamentally collective nature of housing.

2 What do we mean by housing as infrastructure?

When we speak of "housing as infrastructure", we are referring to housing as the skeleton or foundation that enables the physical, social and ecological well-being of individuals and communities living in villages and cities.

Housing is so essential to enabling and sustaining individual and collective human life and flourishing that adequate housing is recognised as a human right in international human rights law as part of an adequate standard of living. As a human right, and not a commodity, adequate housing contains seven interdependent key elements which can be understood as state-guaranteed freedoms and entitlements. These include having secure tenure and not having to fear, resist, or experience forced evictions or dispossession of your home or land. The human right to adequate housing follows human rights principles, including universality and inalienability, that all people everywhere in the world are entitled to human rights simply because we exist as human beings. This means that human rights are not granted by States, but that States do have obligations and duties under international law to respect, protect and fulfil human rights, including the right of individuals and groups to remedy and reparation for violations of human rights.

> The ideologies of States are reflected in their human settlement policies. These being powerful instruments for change, they must not be used to dispossess people from their homes and their land, or to entrench privilege and exploitation. The human settlement policies must be in conformity with the declaration of principles and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
> - Vancouver Declaration on Human Settlements, 1976

The concept of "housing as infrastructure" emerges from a broader discussion that frames housing as more than just a physical structure or the subject of a property right. It shifts the focus from individual dwellings to a broader and interlocking system—one that includes not only visible elements such as the built environment and its quality but also invisible elements like social relationships, and power dynamics (e.g. represented by legal frameworks and governance structures) that shape the making and unmaking of homes, communities and living spaces.

As a physical infrastructure, housing is the most prevalent type of built environment, representing about 80% of urban areas globally. Unlike traditional grey infrastructure, such as roads, housing is dispersed and decentralised in almost every area of our villages and cities. It is the underlying structure without which other facilities, services, and rights that support an adequate and dignified quality of life cannot function properly.

As a social infrastructure, housing is the fundamental support to access other rights, services, and benefits; it supports health, education, nutrition, care, and many other fundamental human rights and needs. For example, upgrading housing in informal settlements can lead to a 4% increase in global life expectancy. It is therefore critical to think about housing as central to social protection frameworks. Housing is also a critical economic infrastructure. It is one of the sectors that contributes most to national economies (at least 13%); housing is even more critical for households that depend on informal employment, which represent the majority of the world (close to 60%).

As an environmental infrastructure, housing and residential buildings account for the largest share of energy sector emissions and 12.5% of all emissions globally, which means that if approached more mindfully, housing can also serve as a nature-based infrastructure.

Most importantly, housing is not automatically a protective and nurturing system, but also one that can exploit, exclude, and abandon. This is especially the case in current economic arrangements, where adequate housing is treated as a commodity (i.e. something that is bought and sold) and not as a human right (i.e. something that belongs to all human beings and does not depend on financial status, economic or any other conditions or criteria). In this sense, housing is also a space where power is exercised, negotiated, but also challenged. Feminists globally have been particularly influential in shaping our understanding that housing can function as a space of social reproduction, care and well-being (see section below), while also being deeply rooted in structures of inequality and resistance. This means that the way we approach housing can lock cities and human settlements into unsustainable pathways that deepen social and spatial divisions and environmental degradation.

Or, alternatively, we can promote cities and human settlements that are caring, developmental, reparative, fair, and sustainable.

3 What do we mean by the social function of housing?

The way housing is produced, provided and used must not only meet the needs of dignified human life (by ensuring that housing is 'adequate'). Housing must also prioritise fulfilling the greatest needs within the whole of society (the social function). This means taking into consideration the needs of individuals, households, communities and social groups who are marginalised, in the minority, and/or subjected to discrimination currently and historically. It means recognising housing as a living infrastructure that connects the intimate scale of daily household routines with broader structures of society. It means recognising how the quality and availability of housing enables or undermines social interactions and relationships, shaping people's capacity to care for themselves and others within and beyond the housing unit.

Recognising and considering the social function of housing applies to all parties involved in housing processes and functions, ranging from individual initiative to collective action, to physical planning, investment and development, inspection, regulation, legislation and housing-policy formulation, among others.

3.1 Housing as infrastructure for more caring cities and human settlements

(a) Housing is an inherently feminist struggle

Viewing housing as infrastructure for caring cities and human settlements roots the debate in feminist approaches, acknowledging housing as an integral component of care, labour and power in the production and reproduction of cities and human settlements. In other words, this perspective helps us situate housing within broader questions of who builds, sustains, and is excluded from rural and urban life. It is a feminist way of seeing and (un) making the city—one that must be reflected in how housing is defined and understood. A housing-as-infrastructure lens helps to make visible the complex connections between intimate, bodily experiences and structural forces playing out in broader society, including displacement, gender-based violence, and economic exploitation.

This view challenges the dominant framing of housing as an individualised, commodified asset, and instead positions it as a social and collective right that is entangled with social reproduction and sol-

idarity. As feminist scholars such as bell hooks and Silvia Federici have long argued, the home is not a neutral or private space, but a contested terrain where power, care work, and resistance intersect. When thinking of caring living spaces, housing policy needs to recognise the unpaid and often invisible labour that takes place within the home, while supporting community-based forms of provision such as cooperatives, mutual aid networks, and collective land tenure. A feminist lens invites us to rethink housing not simply as shelter, but as a space of care, connection, work and political life, and to imagine forms of governance, design, and ownership that centre equity, dignity, and the everyday practices of those who inhabit it.

(b) Housing and care

Housing is where care takes place, where everyday life is sustained, and where the work of social reproduction happens. It is in housing that people rest, recover, raise children, support elders, share meals, and maintain relationships. These are daily practices of care that are often distributed unequally across different gender and racial groups, and made invisible within dominant approaches to urban infrastructure.

From a feminist perspective, care is not only an individual responsibility or a private act but a political and spatial practice. If care is what makes life possible, then the spaces where care unfolds, first and foremost housing, must be recognised as essential infrastructure. In the context of caring cities, this means acknowledging housing as a collective condition for liveability, well-being and justice. It also means understanding housing policies and programmes as a key social protection pillar.

(c) Housing is always political

With this broader notion of housing as infrastructure for caring cities, housing transcends the private realm and becomes a public, collective and relational matter. By viewing housing as infrastructure, we recognise the creativity and agency involved in making spaces livable. This perspective invites us to see housing as a dynamic, relational process that is shaped by individual and collective action, often in opposition to exclusionary or oppressive structures. Housing struggles, whether through tenant organising, land occupations, or informal settlements, are acts of political resistance rooted in care and collective survival. These practices offer different ways of thinking about urban infrastructure, where the home is a site of organising, mutual support and community power. Crucially, this approach avoids both romanticisation and stigmatisation. For example, informal housing, occupations, and land invasions are often framed in binary terms—either as heroic resistance or as a problem. A more nuanced view recognises the agency, strategies, and lived experiences within these spaces while also exposing the structural inequalities that necessitate them. By reframing housing as infrastructure, we open possibilities for seeing otherwise—and therefore, acting otherwise. Reframing housing as infrastructure also means rethinking the political. It is a way of recognising care not as something soft or secondary, but as central to how urban life is organised and sustained. Feminist and decolonial perspectives remind us that cities are not only shaped by capital or planning, but also through everyday acts of care and resistance. To politicise housing is to ask who belongs, who is protected, and whose lives are made liveable in the city.

3.2 Housing as infrastructure for fairer cities and human settlements

Where and how housing is built also plays a critical role in structuring urban development and locking in systems of (in)equity and (in)justice. As an infrastructure, housing planning, laws, and regulations can promote urban development patterns that are exclusionary, through, for example, prioritising the investment interests of the wealthy few, or criminalising alternative forms of housing provision that fall outside of the market logic.

Understanding housing as an infrastructure for fairer cities and human settlements means making a concerted effort to use planning and housing mechanisms that emphasise the social function of housing and are responsive to the needs, context and aspirations of the whole of society. This means putting the human right to adequate housing at the centre of policy and practice. Approaching housing policy and practice through this lens can take many forms, including: working with, rather than against informality to make the most out of urban innovation and bottom-up organising for housing; adapting planning instruments to correct historical discrimination and inequity, from using public land for affordable housing to promoting tenant protection laws; or enabling democratic spaces and feedback channels to better respond to people's realities and monitor housing rights violations.

Advancing housing as an infrastructure of social justice can also demonstrate the role of housing as an infrastructure of climate justice. For instance, by building high-rise housing estates in the outskirts of cities, cities lock themselves into segregated development as well as carbon-intensive human activity. Meanwhile, by promoting adequate housing as a human right for those who have been systematically experiencing housing injustice, well-located housing initiatives (close to livelihoods and services) can activate more equitable and sustainable pathways of urban development. For example, by retrofitting and repurposing inner city properties and land for social housing, cities can not only become more inclusive, but they can also become a driver for the reduction of emissions. In this sense, housing is a key infrastructure shaping how cities operate today and in a sustainable future, influencing value as well as the use of land and developments around them.

4 What do we mean by the ecological function of housing?

4.1 Housing as infrastructure for more sustainable cities and human settlements

Viewing housing as infrastructure for more sustainable cities and human settlements centres the critical role of housing in climate justice efforts. The impacts of climate change are becoming more severe daily, with disasters such as strong winds, heavy rains, and floods leaving 14 million people homeless every year.

Worldwide, inadequate housing is disproportionately inhabited by communities experiencing marginalisation along lines of income, gender, race, and migration status. These communities are most severely affected by climate hazards and climate change-induced disasters, ranging from extreme heat to severe wind storms, flooding, fires and earthquakes. Disasters primarily impact the housing and land sphere. These often result in displacement and hardship, with frequent loss of and damage to lives and livelihoods, perpetuating cycles of poverty for billions.

Across the global south, communities are dealing with these realities daily: finding practical ways to respond to and prepare for climate-induced disasters and displacements. These solutions must be supported, enhanced and scaled in order to ensure that adequate housing is at the heart of climate justice, while addressing the systemic injustices that established and perpetuate this status quo.

To this end, climate adaptation and mitigation efforts will only be effective if they advance the right to adequate housing, rather than compromising it. Indeed, the threat of maladaptation is already a reality, leading to forced evictions in the name of climate action, "reno-victions" where sustainability measures threaten tenure security, and more.

Understanding housing as infrastructure for more sustainable cities and human settlements is also about the remedial role of housing in reparation, reconstruction and recovery following climate change-induced disasters and displacement. More specifically, remedies need to consider the many roles of housing beyond shelter (e.g. livelihoods), ensure realistic resourcing that targets the communities most affected, and recognise community leadership and bottom-up self-organising processes when it comes to how such resources are managed.

(a) Housing as adaptation

The way housing is produced, managed, provided, and experienced can either promote sustainability or reinforce unsustainable practices that risk people's lives and increase climate impacts. Retrofitting or upgrading housing to be climate resilient is a critical climate adaptation strategy. Worldwide, marginalised communities living in inadequate or substandard housing are most severely affected by climate hazards, and safe, resilient housing is one of the best protections against these losses. Improving housing to withstand severe wind, rain, flooding, heat, and fire is critical to the health and well-being of communities worldwide.

(b) Housing as mitigation

To achieve climate ambitions, the building and construction sector must almost completely decarbonise by 2050. Recognising the link between access to adequate housing, housing justice, and disaster resilience is crucial, as those most in need of disaster and climate resilient housing are often the least able to access or afford it, despite contributing the least to climate change.

Integrating resilient housing upgrades into climate commitments and national urbanisation frameworks is essential for cities to reach decarbonisation goals. This involves prioritising retrofitting existing housing to withstand climate impacts and disasters, balancing the need for resilient housing with achieving net-zero goals in the built environment sector by 2030. By recognising the role of city and regional actors in upgrading housing, and educating housing officials about the environmental and cost benefits of retrofitting, cities can effectively harness the strategic value of housing in broader climate change and sustainability debates. This could potentially save 4.8 gigatons of embodied carbon annually, while improving housing for over 268 households worldwide.

c) Housing as reparation

Remedying the costs, loss and damage that result from climate change is recognised as the third pillar of climate action. In a world in which human activity is subjecting the planet to rampant climate change and ever-more extreme manifestations, these are typically accompanied by destruction of housing and displacement, with another 216 million displaced persons expected by 2050. Many of these displaced households will also have to experience resettlement and involuntary displacement, a form of forced eviction that could easily turn villages and cities into urban conflict zones. However, human rights law also provides mandatory guidance for states to ensure that any such resettlement complies with a set of safeguards that are necessary for lawful eviction.

Understanding and advancing the ecological function of housing plays an important part in ensuring that individuals and groups experience remedy and reparation for the costs, loss and damage resulting from climate change. The housing-related component of the right to remedy and reparation is outlined in the rights to which victims of gross violations (such as forced evictions) are entitled. The UN remedy and reparations framework (UN RRF) makes restitution of, consensual return to, and rehabilitation of housing and habitat as indispensable parts of an indivisible package of entitlements. The UNFCCC Fund for responding to Loss and Damage bears a responsibility to action the entitlements outlined in the UN RFF.

To ensure that housing serves reparation purposes, we need to consider the combined human rights measures outlined in the human right to adequate housing, the prohibition against 'forced evictions', and the criteria for implementing the human right to remedy and reparation.

5 Conclusion

Viewing housing as infrastructure allows us to make crucial connections between the various ways that housing influences and is influenced by people, practices of care, sustainability, (in)equality, the economy, the built environment, politics and many other aspects of our societies.

By understanding housing in this way, it is possible to argue more compellingly that its importance moves far beyond housing itself, and rather has multiple major impacts on the way that we live and relate to each other. When we connect housing to other struggles and acknowledge its wider functions, we broaden the horizon for collaborative action and open space for the sort of multi-disciplinary work which is desperately needed for creating more caring, fairer and more sustainable homes, cities, towns and rural areas.

So, while the various wider connections and impacts of housing as an infrastructure that are detailed here are far from comprehensive, they can help us to refocus our efforts, elevate the importance of housing, build solidarity across movements, and bolster the call for vital new areas for investigation and action. The more we recognise housing's central position, its many impacts and the way it connects to so many fundamental aspects of our lives, the more we can fight for homes which improve our world and meaningfully transform our society.

The Hub for Housing Justice is a collaborative initiative led by a group of civil society networks and research organisations. This document is part of the first set of **Provocations** produced by the Hub to collaboratively shape agendas that advance housing justice. During the first half of 2025, four working groups facilitated exchanges on each of the propositions of the housing justice framework. Each group, steered by members of the Hub's partner organisations and open to the participation of all key allies, explored what the propositions mean for the housing justice community and how they can provide a framework for action. The resulting first set of Provocations are creative and collective documents that reflect the takeaways from these dialogues and the experiences, lessons, and recommendations highlighted throughout the exchanges.

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