FEANTSA POLICY BRIEF

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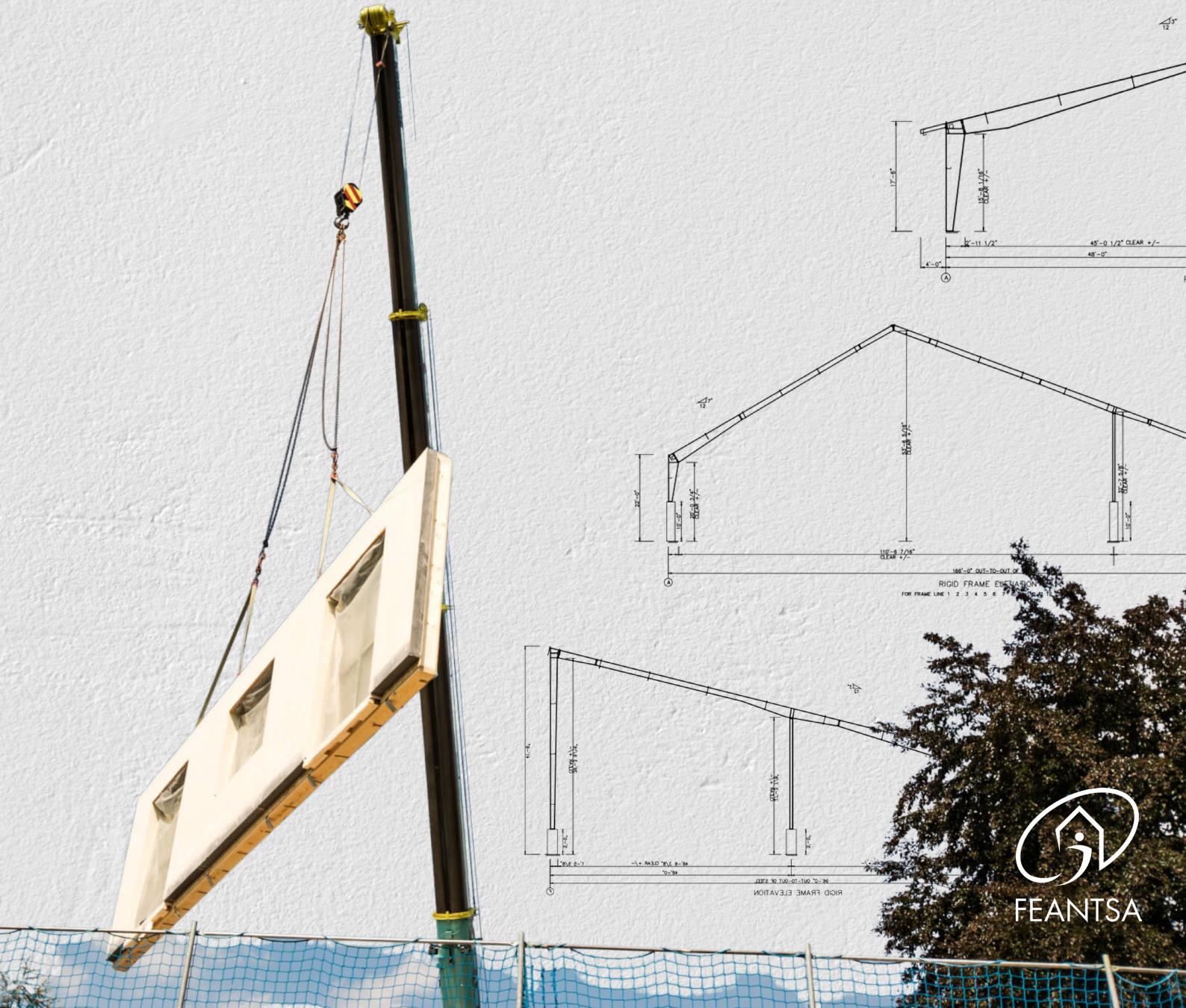
FEANTSA

Housing Solutions Platform

THE DOS AND DON'TS OF MODULAR HOUSING



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AUTHOR:

Ioana Vlad, Housing Policy Officer, FEANTSA

DESIGN BY:

James McQuade, Communications Assistant, FEANTSA

COVER IMAGE:

Crane with modular panel - @manfredxy via iStock, CAD Drawings - @Legacy Building Solutions

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INTRODUCTION

In 2017, the London Borough of Ealing started developing shipping container buildings as a temporary accommodation solution for the growing number of people experiencing homelessness.[1] At that time, it was welcomed as an innovative and quick alternative to bed & breakfast and hotel accommodation. By 2023, when an investigation was called regarding the habitability of the container housing, the local administration already had three such developments, to which the Children's Commissioner for England drew attention in her 2019 report "Bleak Houses"[2] and which mass-media had been calling "shipping container hell" based on the residents' complaints of the poor living conditions.[3] Issues about the size and quality of such housing, which was reported to be very cramped and, due to its metal shell, to be very hot in the summer and cold in the winter, added to issues about its presumed temporariness – what was meant to be a transitory solution, often became a long-term one.[4]

This case illustrates some of the concerns over the use of offsite construction as a quick, but poor fix for housing emergencies. It is by no means singular, and container housing has long been associated with human and housing rights violations, as in the case of the segregated Roma camps in Italy,[5] the relocations following forced evictions in Romania[6] or the detention of asylum seekers in Hungary.[7]

Modular, offsite, or prefabricated housing are different terms under the label of modern methods of construction (MMC). Using offsite manufacturing for housing construction is not new and it has been pointed out that the massive housing and labour shortage following WW2 had led to innovative engineering techniques, using for instance precast concrete, that allowed the fast delivery of homes.[8]

Nowadays, across the EU, the use of MMC for housing construction has been evolving at different speeds, with state of the art technology and widespread use of modular housing in some countries, such as Sweden,[9] and emerging policies that promote industrialised public housing production, like in Barcelona and Ireland. However, the representation of modular for the poorest people is still that of repurposed shipping containers to which they are pushed, usually following evictions. Thus, the discussion around modular housing is also a discussion about who benefits from the technological progress that can improve our lives and how this can serve the ones in most need in an adequate and dignified manner.

With this policy brief, we explore the dos and don'ts of modular housing and what the prerequisites would be that would prevent its use as a distinctly inadequate and stigmatising form of housing. The paper builds on the information and perspectives exchanged during the Housing Solutions Platform's debate on modular housing organised in December 2024.[10] It also provides a tentative mapping of available resources on modular housing projects in different parts of Europe.

WHAT IS MODULAR CONSTRUCTION?

Although the most salient examples in the use of modular construction prompt negative associations with shipping container housing, modular or modern methods of construction (MMC) is a much broader term. The use of MMC in a way that serves the advancement of the right to adequate housing depends on political commitment, as well as on the regulatory framework.

Modular or modern methods of construction are 'the process by which components of a building are prefabricated off-site in a controlled setting and then shipped to the project site and assembled.'[11] It commonly involves wood or steel frames and an important role of digital technologies.[12] MMC comprises a range of manufacturing techniques, which have been systematised by the MMC working group launched in 2017 by the UK government into seven categories.[13] Among these, the most used are volumetric housing units,[14] panelised components, pre-manufactured assemblies and sub-assemblies, and innovative onsite processes.[15]

The purpose of the UK cross-industry group was to increase the knowledge of and support for the use of MMC in the residential sector. As we will show in the next section, such endeavour is not singular, and the promotion of offsite or modular construction has been included in several national and local housing strategies in the past years, as well as in European Union policy documents.

MMC IN EUROPEAN AND NATIONAL POLICIES

The climate crisis and the European policy response to it focused on reducing and transitioning from polluting industries, have also entailed the promotion of new construction materials and methods to leave behind the times of massive cement prefabs, with their damaging effects on the environment. These are to be replaced with more sustainable materials and production processes while also delivering fast enough to respond to urgent housing needs. One EU initiative that aims to catalyse sustainable and inclusive growth is the New European Bauhaus (NEB).[16] NEB is a multi-disciplinary initiative launched by the European Commission in 2020 with the aim of steering a cultural movement that would help mainstream the European Green Deal. Based on the principles of sustainability, aesthetics, and inclusiveness, the NEB policy provides a set of tools and funding options to encourage and guide investments into the built environment. More specifically, modular offsite construction has been repeatedly exemplified

in the 2024 NEB investment guidelines as providing building solutions that are low-waste, flexible, rapid, innovative and sustainable, while not compromising the aesthetic dimension.[17]

Moreover, modular housing is also bound to feature in the EU initiatives related to the construction sector, with the European Commission's announcement of 'a comprehensive new strategy for a sustainable built environment',[18] but also with the Commissioner for Energy and Housing mandated to develop a European Strategy for Housing Construction as part of The Affordable Housing Plan. Commitments to reducing emissions in the production chain of the built environment require both stimulating research and innovation in modern building methods and applying circular economy principles to reduce construction waste.

Decreases in housing construction and housing shortage were premised to have led to growing housing unaffordability across Europe. Consequently, strategies at national or local levels have emphasised the need to stimulate innovation in the construction sector to speed up housing delivery. We will next provide a few examples of how modern methods of construction are featured in housing strategies and plans.

In the UK, the 2017 White Paper "Fixing our broken housing market" sets to stimulate the use of MMC to boost innovation and productivity in the construction sector. Among the cited advantages of this approach, 'homes constructed offsite can be built up to 30% more quickly than traditional methods and with a potential 25% reduction in costs. They are high quality, reliable, more productive and can be highly energy efficient. They can require fewer people on site, helping to mitigate the skills shortage'.[19] More recently, the 2020 report of the Affordable Housing Commission, Making Housing Affordable Again: Rebalancing the Nation's Housing System cites the benefits that MMC could bring especially to speeding up social housing construction, with volumetric construction 'particularly well suited to social housing because the large volumes of standardised accommodation helped to bring down unit costs'.[20]

In Ireland, the 2016 Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness included a Rapid-Build housing programme to move

(Rapid-builds, Finglas, Dublin - Photo: Katherine Brickell, 2017)

homeless families out of hotel arrangements and 'to expedite social housing supply'.[21] The strategy and subsequent reports[22] mentioned the compliance of rapid-build units with the Building Control regulations, making explicit that no compromise on quality standards will be made. It also established delivery targets which were not met - as until 2023 there were 423 completions, compared to the 1500 units target.[23] The Irish housing strategy was renewed in 2021 under the name Housing for All and has as a distinct priority action the increased adoption of Modern Methods of Construction in Public Housing delivery, seen as ensuring more efficiency and environmental sustainability.[24]

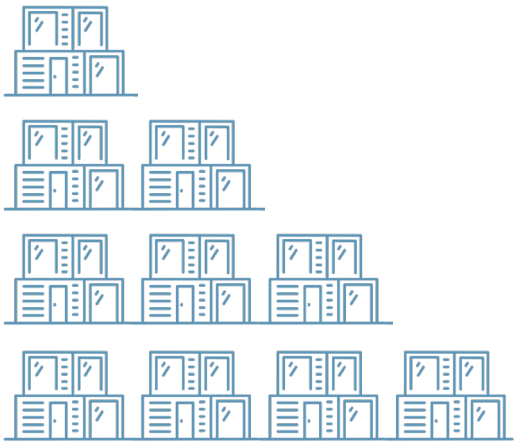
On the local level, in Barcelona, the Plan por el Derecho a la Vivienda 2016-2018 entrusted the newly established Municipal Housing Institute (IMHAB) with the production of over 8000 housing units over ten years.[25] Consequently, IMHAB adopted an industrialised approach to public housing delivery, which was promoted as a faster, greener and more efficient method of construction[26]. Modular construction has been so far used in temporary, emergency housing called APROP (alojamientos de proximidad provisional),[27] as well as in the delivery of permanent public housing.[28] The first APROP development in Ciutat Vella, in the city centre of Barcelona, received European recognition by being awarded the 2021 New European Bauhaus Award in the category Modular, adaptable and mobile living solutions.[29]

In the Netherlands, the flex-housing (flexwonen) policy has received an important boost in the past years, with the 2021 governmental commitment to achieve the delivery of 15,000 flex-units per year until 2030. In a 2019 letter by the Ministry of Interior to the Dutch Parliament on incentivising flexible housing, the latter is defined as: 'stackable, relocatable, switchable, splitable, or adaptable housing, where the dwelling, location or occupant is temporary in nature'.[30] Flex-housing is to be encouraged as complementary to permanent housing, to respond more promptly to people in urgent need of housing (spoedzoekers), in a context of housing shortage. The flex-housing stock is partly meant to take advantage of vacant plots of land awaiting redevelopment.[31]

(APROP Ciutat Vella, Barcelona - Photo: Adrià Goula, 2021)

However, most flex-housing projects are developed by housing corporations,[32] whose need for a strong business case for securing bank financing, determined negotiations with municipalities to extend the operation period. This has been noted to challenge the notion of 'temporary' housing.[33] Several other factors contributed to the dilution of the temporary character of flex-housing: first, housing with a permit of more than 15 years must comply with the Building Code regulations for new construction, thus ensuring that the quality is comparable to permanent housing.[34] Second, although in its incipient stage flex-housing primarily addressed the housing needs of labour migrants, the target group subsequently broadened, also raising the concern that its initial social purpose is getting watered down.[35] Thirdly, the fixed-term rental contracts introduced into legislation in 2015 were abolished in 2024 although the new law also stipulates that temporary rental contracts of two years remain possible for certain target groups such as students and urgent home seekers.[36] Despite this positive change towards better security of tenure, the maintenance of temporary

contracts for these categories also raises the issue of the target group's housing pathway after exiting flex-housing, considering that the housing need might not be temporary and would require permanent solutions.[37] Finally, one other aspect pointing to the convergence of flex-housing & conventional housing is the size of dwellings. According to data from AE-DES, while in the total number of flex-homes built, most of them were of 20-30 sqm and below, in 2022-2023 there is a considerable increase in those of 30-40 sqm and above.[38]



ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING EXCLUSION THROUGH MODULAR HOUSING

OPPORTUNITIES AND POTENTIAL DANGERS

As we have shown so far, modern methods of construction can provide housing as high quality as traditional building techniques, and policymakers at different administrative levels have been emphasising the potential advantages of modular construction, such as speed, reduced costs, and environmental sustainability.

But when it comes to addressing homelessness and housing emergencies, how do modular projects fare in practice, and is there a danger of creating a two-tier system, with housing for the homeless being of less quality? In order to evaluate this and thus discern the dos and don'ts of modular housing, we propose to use the UN seven elements framework that defines the right to adequate housing. We then highlight some problematic and some positive aspects of particular modular projects.

International law imposes concrete obligations on states to ensure the right to adequate housing. This is not an abstract concept and is defined by a number of conditions against which the housing solutions provided to the most vulnerable populations can be evaluated: security of tenure, availability of services, affordability, habitability, accessibility, location, and cultural adequacy.[39] We will focus on four criteria (habitability, security of tenure, location, availability of services), which we have identified as most likely to be problematic in the case of modular housing, and which are interconnected in practice.

First, the quality of modular housing relates to the **habitability** criterion. Housing cannot be considered adequate 'if it does not guarantee physical safety or provide adequate space, as well as protection against the cold, damp, heat, rain, wind, other threats to health and structural hazards.'[40] The habitability is particularly concerning in the case of container housing, which is sometimes used as supposedly temporary accommodation to relocate people following evictions or to house people experiencing homelessness. Although there are cases where shipping containers are used only as a structure, and the improvements done to it result in quality accommodation, like in the APROP developments in Barcelona, in several of the projects we encountered, like some of those documented in Romania, the shipping containers were used as such or with only minimal interventions in terms of insulation. The inhabitability can also overlap with a lack of **services**, **facilities** and **infrastructure**, which is another component of housing ade-

(Container housing in Eforie, Romania - Photo: European Roma Rights Centre, 2021)

quacy, defined by the occupants' access to safe drinking water, adequate sanitation, energy for cooking, heating, lighting, food storage or refuse disposal.[41]

For instance in Eforie, a city in south-east Romania and also a seaside resort, the 2013 mass eviction of a Roma community of about 100 people, living in 40 homes in an informal settlement, resulted in the relocation of some of the families in 12 bare shipping containers placed in the middle of a field, close to the city garbage dump, where they lived until 2023, in cramped and inadequate spaces, without sanitation and access to basic services.[42] After almost 10 years and following lawsuits against the city hall, some of the people were relocated into social housing. In Miercurea Ciuc, a city in central Romania, following a fire in 2021 that destroyed the houses of about 200 Roma people from an informal settlement, 14 of the families were relocated in truck containers.[43] Despite having money specifically allocated by the central government to buy new housing for the families affected, the local administration resorted to containers. This decision was determined by the opposition of the residents where the relocation was planned, who in 2022 launched a lawsuit to suspend the decision of the local council to move the families in the respective area of the city.[44]

In terms of **security of tenure**, 'housing is not adequate if its occupants do not have a degree of tenure security which guarantees legal protection against forced evictions, harassment and other threats.' [45] Here, we must distinguish between modular housing built and assigned as permanent housing and modular as temporary accommodation.

As mentioned, in Ireland modular construction is used in the delivery of public permanent housing and in the Netherlands the characteristics of permanent and flex-housing are converging in terms of quality, aesthetics, permitting and types of contracts.

However, modular housing is also increasingly used as temporary accommodation, with the diversification of temporary accommodation solutions in response to the growing number of people experiencing homelessness. This type of accommodation can be an important step in providing other kinds of services (access to social rights, health services, employment etc.) and for facilitating the transition to permanent housing. At the same time, it has been noted that due to a gross insufficiency of public or social housing, temporary stays often become much longer than initially intended, which can create an association between modular housing and insecure status for residents.

(Modular housing in Pata Rât, Cluj-Napoca, Romania - Photo: Cristina Raț, 2011)

In other contexts, although they are not legally considered housing for temporary accommodation, modular structures have been used to create derogations from national housing legislation. For instance, in Constanța, another city in South-East Romania, a 2011 local council decision launched the development of the "Henri Coandă social campus", comprising 2376 units in 33 modular buildings, to address the housing need of vulnerable people in the municipality. Although the decision stipulates quality standards regarding insulation and the minimum equipment for each unit, it also lays the ground for a system that is parallel to the social housing legislation. The modular housing decision in Constanța makes no reference to the national housing law, which regulates social housing by stipulating the length of the contract, the conditions for contract renewal, the rent, as well as the access and priority criteria. While some criteria are similar between the national and local legislations, the local one introduces new criteria for access to the modular units, such as a five-year ban in the case of people evicted from public housing, and the conditions of being registered with a family doctor, and having the children enrolled in school. It also introduces additional prioritization criteria, such as losing points for having a criminal file, as well as for having informally occupied a public housing unit in the past. Although it is not uncommon for local administrations to establish criteria additional to the national ones and contrary to the spirit of the housing law[46], the Constanța Council decision also sets the rental contract to one year, renewable, in contradiction to the five-year social housing contract stipulated by law.[47]

Another case where modular housing is used in derogation from the adequacy standards imposed by the national housing law is in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. In December 2010, 300 people were relocated to modular units close to Pata Rât garbage dump, following their eviction from public housing in the city centre, which was marked for redevelopment. The National Council for Combatting Discrimination ruled in 2011 that the eviction and relocation of the Roma families to Pata Rât constituted a case of ethnic discrimination, while taking note of the living conditions to which the people were moved: 10 modular units with 40 rooms of 18 square meters made available to over 250 people; a total of 10 bathrooms for all the residents; cracked ceilings, mouldy walls, and water infiltrations from the ground; a 5 km distance from the nearest bus stop and isolation from all public facilities; no heating system at the time of the relocation.[48] Subsequent reports noted the modular housing is not compliant with the rigors of the national housing law, nor with international

standards of adequacy, "particularly in relation to location, habitability and availability of services, facilities and infrastructure".[49] The 2010 eviction marked the beginning of the local housing justice movement,[50] but almost 15 years later people continue to live in the modular housing in Pata Rât, with only part of the families relocated through two projects developed by the city hall with Norwegian grants.[51]

Regarding the diversification of temporary accommodation solutions, two other aspects need further discussion: how the tiny homes concept is articulated with modular housing, and how modular housing is articulated with the emergence of social temporary urbanism. Regarding the first one, in the US we have seen in the past years an institutionalization of so-called tiny homes villages for the homeless, which initially emerged as forms of self-organizing of homeless people.[52] This is a type of transitional housing that has been reported to work better than other forms of homeless accommodation to support people in getting permanent housing[53], but it has also been criticized for reproducing some of the restrictions of congregate shelters.[54]

Temporary accommodation projects in "meanwhile spaces", as part of temporary or transitional urbanism practices,[55] have also become increasingly widespread, and some of these involve the use of modular housing.

In France for instance, modular housing has been used as transitional housing for people in housing exclusion, particularly in the context of the slum clearance policy (Résorption des bidonvilles).[56] This was the case with the transitional village of La Rauze in Montpellier, which from 2022 to 2024 housed 165 people relocated from the Celleneuve shantytown in 54 modular units, to prepare their transition to social housing.[57] The project was reported as a success, with 105 people securing access to social housing.[58] However, the fact that as many as 60 people did not move into permanent housing raises question marks and the need to look more closely into projects showcased as success stories.

Moreover, not all temporary modular projects manage to fulfil their purpose of helping the residents transition to sustainable accommodation. The Home Silk Road project in the Metropole de Lyon provides such an example. From 2020 to 2023, 21 homeless families were placed in high quality modular units, installed on the redevelopment site of a brownfield in the municipality of Villeurbane. In this context, modular housing was used as an innovative way to maximize the use of space during the planning phase of the urban regeneration project, while offering support to the families in accessing social rights and permanent housing. In the end, the latter was not achieved due to the irregular administrative status of the family members, & the people were subsequently moved to another temporary site awaiting renovation.[59]

'Subsequent reports noted the modular housing is not compliant with the rigors of the national housing law, nor with international standards of adequacy, particularly in relation to...

LOCATION

HABITABILITY

and availability of

SERVICES

FACILITIES

and

INFRASTRUCTURE

In the Brussels Capital Region, there are similar temporary use projects, aiming to combat the waste of empty spaces throughout the city, partly through the provision of modular transitional housing.[60] Social organizations such as Diogenes[61] and Infirmiers de Rue[62] have developed modular units whose quality is compliant with the local housing legislation to house people experiencing homelessness, as part of Housing First projects. Communa, a leading organisation in practices of temporary occupation of disused spaces, has also developed modular projects, such as the Tritomas project assisting Ukrainian refugees, as part of Brussels Helps Ukraine.[63]

Location is another important factor in assessing housing adequacy. Within the UN framework, "housing is not adequate if it is cut off from employment opportunities, healthcare services, schools, childcare centres and other social facilities, or if located in polluted or dangerous areas".[64] In some of the projects, such as APROP in Barcelona or flex-housing projects in the Netherlands, the location of modular housing is a central element, with particular attention being paid to ensure that units are spatially integrated in the neighbourhoods and not placed in the periphery or outside of the city. There are many examples of the opposite occurring, whereby the location perpetuates & deepens the exclusion of the relocated communities. For example, this is the case in the already mentioned projects in Romania.

Even in projects where an integration approach to modular housing is aimed, a specific issue to be considered is the reaction of the existing residents. For this reason, in some of the projects, such the APROP in Barcelona, particular attention has been paid to facilitating a participatory process around the modular project, to ensure the support of the existing residents. Regarding the flex-housing projects in the Netherlands, it has been noted that gathering local support for the insertion of modular housing into the neighbourhood can be a lengthy and complicated process, especially when dealing with the residents' fears that the construction would be inaesthetic, would decrease the value of their own homes and the flex-tenants would cause trouble.[65] To that matter, the reaction of the neighbourhood has been highlighted as a particular problem in Modulo, a modular housing first project in Brussels, whose implementation was affected by the neighbours' rejection of the homeless people housed in the modules, which led to their replacement with Ukrainian refugees, who were more easily accepted by the local community.[66]

THE EXPERIENCE OF MODULAR HOUSING

Beyond technical discussions regarding the quality or legal aspects of modular housing, we must also consider the experience of its residents in both the evaluation process and improvement proposals.

Among the modular projects previously discussed, the residents' experience of the Rapid Build programme in Dublin was most explicitly the focus of in-depth research. Researchers Mel Nowicki, Katherine Brickell and Ella Harris explored the perceptions of previously homeless families that moved to the first two permanent modular developments of the Rapid Build Programme in Dublin, in Ballymun and Finglas. They emphasized the importance of terminology and aesthetics of modular housing in countering the feelings of being singled out as former homeless individuals. Interviews with residents revealed differences in perception between the tenants of Ballymun and those of Finglas, stemming from the terms used to promote this type of housing, with the Ballymun development considered modular, while the Finglas one named Rapid Build. Although in the time between the two developments, the term modular was replaced by Dublin City Council with "rapid build" so it wouldn't evoke the method used, but rather the rapid response to housing emergency, the residents still associated both terms with post-war prefabs suggesting poor quality and temporariness. This contributed to their feelings of anxiety over the long-term character of their housing, even though the building technology ensured its quality was comparable to conventional construction.

The negative perception of modular as post-war prefab or container housing also led to its rejection on the part of the existing residents. Moreover, the brick-and-mortar cladding in Finglas contributed to the aesthetic integration of the new construction into the neighbourhood, as opposed to the grey cladding of the Ballymun development that made the building stand out and thus make its residents feel marked and stigmatized as previously homeless[67].

We thus see that beyond its objective quality made possible by technological progress, the perception of both the residents and the neighbours is equally important in aiding the integration process. However, a positive perception is potentially more difficult to achieve when it comes to modular housing as temporary accommodation, and the inadequacy of this solution becomes particularly prevalent when temporary becomes long-term. Issues of poor quality and/or location, and the experience of being stuck in a marginalizing and degrading living situation have been raised by the residents of Ealing Council's modular projects, which they called "container hell", as well as by the Roma people forcefully evicted by Cluj-Napoca City Hall from the city centre to the city's garbage dump.[68]

'They emphasized the importance of terminology and aesthetics of modular housing in countering the feelings of being singled out as former homeless individuals.'

Considering the technological capacity to deliver modular housing at just as high a standard as 'traditionally built' homes, why is it that it is used to provide lower quality housing solutions? First, as noted by the Dutch Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL), the investment in high quality flex-housing can reach over 100,000 euros.[69] Similarly, in the case of the industrialized housing projects in Barcelona, it has been noted that the costs are similar to those of conventional construction, the advantages residing in the higher speed and diminished environmental impact.[70] Thus, the quality of this type of housing still depends on adequate investment, and it is more likely to be weakened when it's specifically purposed for temporary accommodation. To that matter, the evaluation report of Place2BU, a temporary housing project in Utrecht developed in 2018 mixing young people in search of housing with status holders and people leaving social care institutions, noted that a lower quality of housing was chosen due to the temporary nature of the project and to reduce costs, which translated into noisy and hot units, with frequent leaks and floodings, affecting the quality of living.[71]

One last point but not less important on what determines the choice of inadequate modular housing is the issue of institutional racism, evidenced by the mass evictions suffered by Roma communities and their relegation to segregated living conditions, such as the container camps in Italy, extensively documented by the European Roma Rights Centre and Amnesty International[72], as well as the forced evictions and relocations to modular projects in Romania.

On the other hand, when modular housing can serve as an example of quality temporary accommodation, as in the case of the APROP projects in Barcelona or of the Home Silk Road in Lyon, an additional issue to consider is that of transitioning to sustainable housing, which so far has proved difficult to achieve. Moreover, as noted by the research report on the implementation of the Modulo project in Brussels,[73] the amount of resources dedicated to a temporary, albeit innovative programme of modular units did not match its limited impact, in the context of chronic shortage of permanent social housing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We have illustrated the varied ways in which modern methods of construction are used to provide solutions in response to homelessness, housing emergency and more broadly, housing shortage. There are several lessons to be learned from the examples provided. Of these, the most important is that modern construction techniques should not be used to provide poor quality and inadequate housing to vulnerable people. As obvious as it may seem, we see that in practice this is not uncommon.

- Even when modular housing is used as temporary accommodation, quality standards must be ensured in terms of space, insulation, and access to facilities.

- Where modular housing is provided as temporary accommodation, special attention must be paid to its location on the one hand, and to neighbourhood integration on the other, in order to prevent endangering the lives of its beneficiaries (as in the cases of relocation to polluted areas) and their stigmatization.

- Temporary solutions, regardless of how innovative they are in terms of quality or land use, and even though they can be useful in providing the social support needed, must be complemented with permanent, sustainable, social or public housing solutions.

- In the context of EU level promotion of modern methods of construction, appropriate monitoring must be undertaken to ensure modular projects funded from European money do not lead to forced evictions of vulnerable communities, respect the right to adequate housing for all the people affected by the project, and do not falsely claim that adequate housing standards have been provided.

- Modern methods of construction can and have been used to deliver permanent social housing that is compliant with building regulations. We believe this is the right direction to take.

- However, it is essential to also consider the perspective and vulnerabilities of the beneficiaries in the design of modular social housing and support architectural work that aids integration instead of creating new lines of division. As research has shown, aesthetics that facilitate the identification of housing projects as specifically for the poor or homeless have a segregating and stigmatizing effect.

INTERVIEW

Mr. Eugen Ghiță

RomaJust – the Association of Roma Lawyers

I have been a human rights expert since 2008; I started at Romani Criss. In 2016, together with several colleagues at the law school in Iași, I founded the Association of Roma Lawyers. The need for such an organisation came from research that found only 5% of Roma law school graduates end up practicing in the legal field. We decided to correct this and give more support to students. Since then, the activities developed along the way. One need we discovered in Roma communities was the lack of access to justice, which we took on and now cover in several fields – health, education, and housing. In the past years I have also worked as a Council of Europe expert on hate speech and hate crime, training judges, prosecutors, policemen, as well as NGO experts.

In the field of housing, our organisation was requested by communities to intervene in forced evictions in several cities. We started with the case in Focșani in 2017, where people were taken out of a derelict social housing building, which they were discussing whether to renovate or demolish. They chose to demolish it even though there was a small cost difference between the two options. Now they are building prettier apartments for doctors and teachers and a park to contribute to the green transition. About 90 people lived there; they were moved to container units handled through a partnership between the city hall and the Red Cross. The containers still exist, but the people are not the same; some received social housing, others left the city. More recently we have another case in Focșani: the public administration wants to renovate the social housing stock through a European funded project, and they sued all the tenants to cancel their rental contracts and clear the space, saying they must move fast because they don't want to lose the European money. We intervened and managed to save some of the rental contracts, but we didn't succeed in all the cases. Some households were moved to the containers, about 12-14 families; the rest of them, about 50 families, left to live with relatives and friends on the outskirts of the city or in the surrounding villages.

We have the same approach in Giurgiu in 2018, where the city hall had trouble collecting rent and utilities from the social housing tenants. They commissioned a seismic report and demolished the building, invoking safety concerns for those living there. About 40 out of 100 people who were living in the building were moved to container units; some of them were later given social housing, but others had their applications refused because of previous debt. We intervened to do justice, but the people weren't there anymore. This happens frequently - people cannot stay in the streets and wait for you for seven or eight months, until maybe something gets solved. And the public administration counts on the fact that people will feel intimidated and leave the city on their own. The containers were eventually removed because the neighbours didn't want them, there were a lot of complaints; it was a better -off area in the city where people cannot stand being outraged. I don't know all the details, but there seems to have been a real estate scandal behind the story, with a developer building apartments for sale in the place of the demolished social housing.

So in two years we have seen two social housing buildings demolished, even though our stock is already very poor.

We also had a case in Constanța, where it's the biggest modular neighbourhood in the country, with 650 families. Here we had to do the opposite, to fight to get about 20 families into the modular housing. They were living in an informal settlement in makeshift shelter on a piece of land that was claimed by the church. The city hall wouldn't allow them to apply for the modular housing because they had debt, but we managed to get them in. Now they have started some urbanistic plans to move this neighbourhood to another location outside of the city. They say the modular housing is not adequate, but the discussions so far have been more about how the new neighbourhood will be connected to the city, rather than about the quality of the new housing. It is also possible that the reason behind the relocation is the real estate interest in the area.

In Eforie, the story began in September 2013 when 40 homes were demolished following the mayor's decision that they did not have valid property deeds. Romani Criss took on the case, they filed complaints everywhere. Seeing there were protests, the city hall moved the people into some derelict buildings, with no beds, no anything. At the end of winter, the people were moved in containers one kilometre outside the city, on a field, under the power cables so they would have electricity only in the evening; they placed one water faucet for all the families, at 500 meters from the containers. There were 70-80 people in 12 bare shipping containers, basically just a rectangular room where they all slept and ate. In 2014 the city hall also installed the garbage dump next to that place.

They lived like this until 2023, so for 10 years, without water and sanitation; the containers began to rust and what started as a three-person container ended up sheltering 10 people. In 2017, the demolition was judged as illegal and the court ruled that the city hall should give housing and compensation to the families affected, but the local administration did nothing. In 2019 RomaJust took on the case from Romani Criss and filed a complaint against the city hall for not enforcing a court judgement; we obtained penalties of 100 RON for each day the implementation was delayed, so we started from 25 thousand euros per person as compensation for the time between 2017-2019, when the court's decision was ignored. We fought very hard together with the bailiff to make the City Hall pay, but they always kept their accounts empty. By that time we only found around 14 families still living in the containers, the rest having moved to another makeshift encampment or gone to work abroad. The endless delay is part of the local administrations' strategy to wear you down and make you leave on your own.

These families that were still left at the containers were eventually put into social housing, which they were forced to accept under the threat that they won't get anything else ever again. The housing was in very bad shape; they only had walls, everything else was completely run down. They didn't tell us they signed the contracts, but if they wouldn't have and would have continued in the containers, they would have lived in misery for another two or three years.

Now the city hall says they have respected their obligation to allocate social housing, even though they only gave it to some households and they didn't respect the financial compensation obligations. We are now fighting for compensation, with part of the group already at the European Court of Human Rights, and with another part in the process of getting to the European Court. With yet another group we are effectively trying to get the money from the City Hall. And we are also trying to get the public administration to allocate housing in private property, not social housing, because what they have destroyed was the people's own property. This is the fight now and whatever one group wins will also benefit the others.

Another case we were informed about is in Slobozia, where they want to renovate their social housing with European money; they said they now have the opportunity to build a new neighbourhood, with a social canteen, a playground, and so on. And what to do with the people there – "let's throw them out and move them to containers". They bought around 40 containers and put them on a field outside an already segregated Roma neighbourhood, on a former garbage dump that they quickly covered. They reasoned that being vulnerable people, what better place to take them? Now we are in the research process, and we identified victims that would give us the power to represent them. People see the new housing and they don't immediately realise the long-term effects; now they only see this is something better than they had before. The containers here are more modern than in the other locations I mentioned, they are compartmented as mini apartments; they say they are insulated and have some ecological heating system.

"People see the new housing and they don't immediately realise the long-term effects; now they only see this is something better than they had before."

'In the project application they reported the land as being empty even though 400-500 people had been living there for 20 years.'

But what is truly negative for the people is they are removed from the city - they don't have access to the city anymore. On the other hand, those who are already living in the Roma neighbourhood hope this move will bring more infrastructure investments that would also benefit them. We will see when they receive their contracts, at least some of them; others will probably not be relocated because of accumulated debt. The people in the city hall say the European funds and the money are more important than our rights. A source in the city hall told me the social housing will be sold for a hotel. We have our eyes on them.

Together with another organisation we are also documenting the negative effects of European funds on vulnerable communities. The latest case we took on last year and we are fighting is at Arad, where 100 houses were demolished through a European project to make a park, and the city hall didn't even have the money to finish it. In the project application they reported the land as being empty even though 400-500 people had been living there for 20 years. Some people received social housing but most of them didn't get anything, they just left. It was a mass demolition on obvious ethnic grounds, but these projects are not checked and monitored by anybody.

(Container housing development in Slobozia, Romania - Photo: Eugen Ghiță, 2024)

This reminds me of a case that made me very angry, at Miercurea Ciuc. In 2021 about 60-70 houses in an informal settlement caught fire. The people were moved to a school gym where they stayed for the entire pandemic. Finally, the city hall got some money from the government to build housing in the industrial area, which is not ideal, but it was close to the city and had utilities. And at a meeting organised at Bucharest by the Ministry of Public Works and the World Bank, the vice-mayor came to tell us they tried to build a neighbourhood, but the business people in the area approached her saying they would close their business and leave if she would bring those "thieves" there. Because of this they suspended the project, and they put the people in truck containers in the field. At the meeting, this was given as a good example of modular housing. I got very mad, but I was told not to be so mean.

(Container housing development in Slobozia, Romania - Photo: Eugen Ghiță, 2024)

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European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless

194 Chaussée de Louvain, 1210 Brussels, Belgium
T +32 (0)2 538 66 69 • information@feantsa.org

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