



**BEHIND THE GREEN
CURTAIN: AN
EXPLORATION OF
SOCIAL JUSTICE
PATHWAYS FOR A JUST
TRANSITION IN COPENHAGEN'S
BUILT ENVIRONMENT**

Part of the global project: *Building for
Today and the Future: Advancing a Just
Transition in the Built Environment*

THE BUILDING FOR TODAY AND THE FUTURE PROJECT

This report is one of eight city research summaries as part of the global IHRB project “Building for Today and the Future: Advancing a Just Transition in the Built Environment”

In Europe, buildings account for 40% of energy consumption and 36% of carbon dioxide emissions. In the 27 countries of the European Union (EU27), the residential building stock makes up 3/4 of the total stock.¹ At the same time, cities are often where people experience the impacts of climate change, rising living costs, and socio-economic inequalities.

The project examines green transition processes in the built environment of eight cities globally, aiming to (1) strengthen the understanding of social justice and human rights issues in each context and globally, and (2) open up pathways for local and international action to improve the social sustainability of these processes. The results of this project will help stakeholders make informed decisions in urban and sustainability policies, and take steps towards implementation (in various contexts and at various levels of governance).

The project is structured in four research cycles, each undertaking parallel research in two cities to derive comparative insights. The pairs of cities are: Prague and Lagos, Lisbon and Melbourne, Copenhagen and Jakarta, Athens and Valparaíso.

The report intends to inform policy-makers, investors, and businesses involved in shaping the built environment in Copenhagen, as well as civil society actors working to expand the space for socially inclusive climate action.



TERMINOLOGY

Built environment: The tangible urban environment, i.e. buildings, infrastructure and the spaces that connect them.

Built environment decarbonisation: Measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the built environment by improving the energy efficiency of new and existing buildings, switching to renewable energy supplies, and reducing the climate footprint of construction materials.

Built environment resilience: Measures to strengthen the resilience of buildings and infrastructure to the impact of climate-related events such as flooding, extreme heat, and sea level rise.

Just transition: While pioneered by the labour movement and the ILO, the wider concept today involves a series of aligned and coherent climate actions that effectively fulfil both environmental and social purposes:

1. A transition to an ecologically-conscious model that allows societal development within planetary boundaries, and
2. Ensure the benefits of that shift are equitably spread and enjoyed throughout the population, and that its costs are not borne by traditionally excluded or marginalised groups.

The project focuses particularly on four thematic areas of the built environment: the right to housing, construction workers' rights on site and through supply chains, non-discrimination and spatial justice, and meaningful participation.

The project recognises that “just transitions” are context specific, and that the overall concept continues to evolve. The project therefore aims to engage with local language, narrative and perspectives while also building international momentum for positive change. The local research is accompanied by visioning workshops that bring stakeholders together to envision pathways towards a more inclusive, sustainable and just city.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND PARTNERSHIPS

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BWI
Building and Wood
Workers' International
www.bwint.org



Laudes ———
— Foundation



Ove Arup Foundation

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SUMMARY

Over the past two decades, Copenhagen has led the way globally in becoming a greener, healthier city. However, not all citizens have equally benefited from this green transformation, particularly due to increasing housing prices challenging people's access to affordable housing in the city, resulting in green gentrification.

This study builds on desk research, stakeholder interviews and a visioning workshop to investigate pathways to strengthen the social dimensions of decarbonisation and climate resilience in Copenhagen's built environment. The research, its analysis, conclusions, and recommendations aim to embed greater attention to human rights standards, legal obligations and responsibilities within relevant government and business actions.

The research indicates that initiatives such as holistic urban design, multifunctional design, new living/housing models, and meaningful citizen engagement foster a more resilient, decarbonised and socially just city. However, much more work is required to mainstream these approaches into local government and businesses' policies and processes, and to overhaul those that are exacerbating social inequality.

This research study found undeniable evidence of Copenhagen's leading role in climate action and environmental sustainability, which has made the city so proud. However, it also revealed a clear need to mature the social dimensions of climate actions in its built environment. This includes the development of a common understanding, language, goals and indicators that lift the importance of social sustainability, with a focus on human rights standards and approaches, on a par with environmental priorities.



RESEARCH PROCESS

Between July and September 2023, IHRB and Ramboll conducted desktop research, stakeholder interviews and a visioning workshop to gather perspectives and insights on the social impacts of the green transition in Copenhagen's built environment. The literature review included government reports and policy documents, as well as past, current and planned social sustainability, resilience and biodiversity initiatives in Copenhagen and the surrounding areas.

A stakeholder mapping exercise identified 42 relevant actors, 14 of whom were interviewed across academia, industry (architecture/design, developers), workers and tenants associations, investors, local government, think-tanks and philanthropies (see appendix for interview list).

The data was coded and analysed according to four themes: participation and decision-making processes, socio-spatial inequalities, the right to housing, and construction workers' rights.

Lastly, a visioning workshop was held on 12 September 2023 at the Democracy Garage in Copenhagen. A diverse group of built environment stakeholders gathered to discuss how human rights and social inclusion can be strengthened in the decarbonisation of the built environment, and co-created an inspiring vision for a just and sustainable Copenhagen.²



CONTEXT: THE BALANCING ACT OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

In the 1980's, the city of Copenhagen faced a financial crisis with the decline of ports, industries and neighbourhoods. In response, elected leaders and local officials began to develop and implement new financing models to remediate the financial crisis and build a more attractive and liveable city with ambitious economic, social and environmental goals.³

Since the 1990s, the national government has introduced legislative measures, plans, and dedicated funding to improve the built environment and social outcomes, including in socially exposed (i.e. vulnerable) areas⁴. A particularly novel approach was introduced in the 2018 'Parallel Society Agreement'⁵ which set out a maximum (40%) for the amount of social housing dedicated to families in certain socially exposed areas, thus attempting to address social challenges by physically changing the built environment and its demographics.

In 2006, Copenhagen joined the C40 cities network⁶, gaining recognition for its strong progress on green transport, climate resilience, waste reduction, and recycling.⁷ In 2013, the city announced its intention to become the first climate-neutral city by 2025. Although the target date was pushed to 2035 in December 2022⁸, Copenhagen maintains its ambition by focusing on energy consumption, production, and transportation while also improving quality of life through green spaces,

noise reduction, sustainable and healthy mobility, and low-carbon infrastructure as outlined in its climate plan.⁷ This holistic approach concurrently enhances climate resilience and liveability. By combining holistic planning with technology, Copenhagen's strategy has aimed to adapt to urban life and stimulate local job creation. The Østerbro climate-neighbourhood exemplifies this approach, striving to become the greenest neighbourhood in the city while also preparing for increased rainfall due to more frequent extreme weather events.⁹

The city council, along with City & Harbor (*By og havn*) and supportive developers, leads on these ambitions. Established in 2007, City & Harbor is a for-profit, publicly-owned developer, landowner and port authority which aims for long-term, holistic urban development. The profit it generates by building and selling homes is reinvested into current and future infrastructure and housing.¹⁰ In this way, it is able to have an integrated approach to housing, transportation, the port, and other infrastructure in the city.

However, some stakeholders point out that By and Havn's economic model encourages profit maximisation from the real estate industry to finance and justify its investments. This economic model may be problematic for the access to affordable housing: on one hand investing in the built environment sector is mostly driven by a private market with an upward trend in housing prices, and on the other, facing the need to offer affordable housing options to Copenhagen's dwellers. This is a challenge for the city's overall housing policy, and it is a topic of worthy attention to ensure that the human right to decent and affordable housing is not compromised in Copenhagen.



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HUMAN RIGHTS RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

In Copenhagen, a key challenge in the built environment is balancing access to affordable housing for the growing population with reducing CO₂ emissions from construction. This necessitates careful considerations and prioritisation by local government, citizens, developers, and investors. While environmental indicators are widely understood and adopted, efforts to establish similar social indicators that incorporate existing human rights duties and responsibilities are not fully developed, with few good practice examples currently available.

PARTICIPATION AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

Identifying key 'decision-makers' in Copenhagen's built environment is complex due to unclear governance structure, capabilities, and responsibilities. The interviews conducted have identified the municipality, government agencies, pension funds, investors, developers, and architects as key actors. Their timely inclusion in decision-making processes is crucial, yet difficult, as it requires cross-disciplinary collaboration and significant political will. When roles, capabilities, responsibilities and structures are unclear, progress towards a resilient and just built environment is more challenging (Interviews 3, 5 and 10).

“

“There is a lot about community engagement we have not considered yet – it's not just raising hands at a meeting”

— Research participant

Balancing timely decisions and citizen participation poses a challenge, according to interviewees. There is pressure to implement projects swiftly while ensuring genuine public involvement, and support. Citizen engagement is not always recognised – or experienced from a citizen perspective - as a central part of planning processes. Facilitating meaningful participation is also perceived as daunting since it involves more than just

soliciting input; it requires creating an environment where citizens genuinely feel their voices are accounted for, and where their contributions lead to tangible outcomes, which can be complex and demanding (See [Arnstein's ladder of participation](#)).¹¹

Meaningful citizen engagement is a two-way interaction between citizens and governments. “The right to participate in political and public life is important in empowering people [...] and is inseparably linked to other human rights such as the rights to peaceful assembly and association, freedom of opinion and expression and the rights to education and to information”.¹²

Citizen participation is not only a good urban governance imperative, but also a strategic business decision. Insufficient consultation and dialogue with local communities can result in lack of public support for projects, which can even delay or completely prevent urban development projects from being carried out.¹³ Citizen discontent has been seen to manifest itself in grassroots organisations' resistance as in the cases of “Stop Lynetteholm” and “Amager Fælleds Venner” (Amager village's friends).¹⁴

However, grassroots and neighbourhood movements also demonstrate that local knowledge and community-driven initiatives can be strategic allies in built environment projects, if their value is acknowledged and embraced. That is when developers, investors, and local government are genuinely interested and keen to leverage the agency and ideas of citizens. Such multi-sectoral collaboration promotes social and environmental sustainability through a bottom-up approach, like in the case of “Grønne Nabofællesskaber” (Green Neighbourhood Communities) which “inspires communities and creates active citizenship”.¹⁵

The Municipality of Copenhagen and the local committees are successfully using new engagement initiatives (Interview 3 and 7).¹⁶ For example, in the area of Amager Vest, citizens can sign up for 'digital citizen panels' and complete surveys to indicate what they value in their area.¹⁷ The Municipality has also invited school children to express what they would like to see more of when it comes to biodiversity. The children's ideas and recommendations have been gathered in a report “Children's and young people's recommendations for biodiversity strategy 2050”¹⁸, demonstrating how political leadership can foster civic engagement at early stages and amplify the voices of often underrepresented groups.

These initiatives are steps in the right direction, which can be further improved through stronger data-driven methods, more targeted approaches and new technologies.

SOCIO-SPATIAL INEQUALITIES

A central debate in Copenhagen's built environment agenda is the contention for public and private space, while also striving for high sustainability standards. This pertains to the right to access, use of and influence on, spaces.

Building in accordance with high-sustainability standards, e.g. DGNB-certificates or high energy-classes, can be expensive.¹⁹ Organisations representing socially vulnerable citizens and public housing organisations are particularly attentive towards what will happen when higher sustainability standards are imposed, and what impact they will have on affordability of housing and socio-spatial inequities. While high sustainability standards, implying good quality of housing, are necessary, interviewees 4 and 6 warned that costs of meeting these standards should not produce nor exacerbate social imbalances.²⁰

Without social safeguards, green gentrification will be inevitable. Investments in areas like Vesterbro, Christianshavn and Nørrebro²¹ have developed and supported cafes and restaurants, but they have also increased prices (land and cost of living) that limit access and foster a sense of exclusion among people who can no longer afford the cost of living in these areas.²² Moreover, interviewees 3, 4, and 7 underlined that it is important to have diverse and multifunctional designs to avoid marginalisation of the elderly and homeless. The creation of an inclusive built environment requires a clear goal to address (design and plan for) the diverse needs of various population groups.

A way to include diverse perspectives in the built environment is optimising space usage through multifunctional design. The Parking House Lüders and The Red Square²³ examples showcase modern architects' emphasis on multifunctional design for maximising building and public space. Additionally, urban design that encourages interactions between different citizen groups is vitally important (Interviews 2, 3, and 4).

The Parallel Society Agreement²⁴ (2018) identified a series of socially exposed areas (previously referred to as 'ghettos' and presently as "transformation areas")

based on a set of socio-economic criteria including unemployment, low income, low education, high level of criminal convictions, and ethnic background²⁵. This agreement provided dedicated investment aiming to improve these areas - at present 15 - by transforming the built environment, through introducing a more mixed housing stock than the present high concentration of social housing. This implies, amongst others, the relocation ('genhusning') of residents who are offered social housing in other neighbourhoods. While the long-term social impacts of the Agreement are yet to be seen, early results indicate that the demographic and functional mix in these areas increased as intended, but that there are still huge social challenges both within the areas and for the relocated residents, who may, amongst others, lose their social network. The approach has also been widely criticised for discrimination of ethnic minorities^{26,27} and for exacerbating housing unaffordability by privatising the public housing stock in those areas.

THE RIGHT TO HOUSING

Over the past two decades, property prices in the city of Copenhagen have surged (figure 1) due to increasing population, a sharp decrease in public housing since the 1990s (figure 2)²⁸, financialisation of housing²⁹, and increased focus on private and luxury homes. The increase in prices poses challenges to state duties to ensure the realisation of the right to access adequate and affordable housing for low and middle-income individuals and families.

FIGURE 1

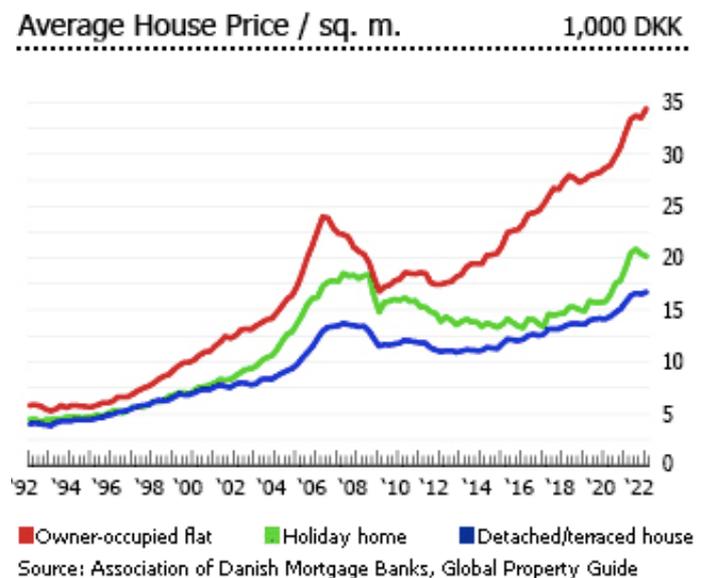
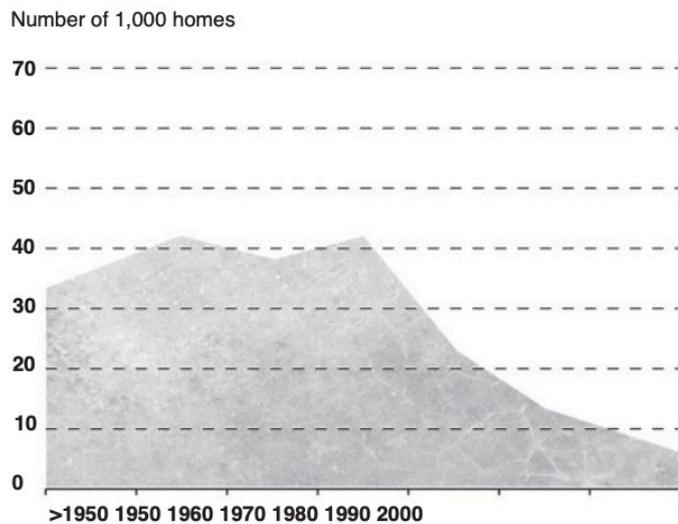


FIGURE 2

Public housing in the capital area, Denmark



Source: kglakademi.dk

To shift towards sustainable, efficient living spaces that can accommodate more people, the assumption that generally has been made that 'bigger housing is better' should be countered with effective alternatives. For example, construction of smaller apartments with a focus on establishing common and comfortable areas has been proposed by many (interviewees 1, 3, 8, 9, 11 and 12). A notable example of this is Umeus Nordhavn³⁰, which challenges the requirement of a 35-square metres minimum size for student apartments. Instead, it prioritises shared spaces, contributing positively to both the green transition and social outcome. Compact, more efficient living spaces can reduce the environmental footprint and foster community and well-being among a diverse group using common areas. For example, the Danish architectural firm Vandkunsten has shown how it is possible to live better and more sustainably in micro homes, "built as a village with a greenhouse, common house and playground, it is a small community and a city that lives".³¹

However, it is worth reflecting that size is not a root issue, but instead the price of housing per *square metre*. The alternative of smaller apartments could indeed foster good environmental and social practices, however, this argument should not be an excuse to squeeze lower income groups into tiny flats. It is important to ensure quality standards for all homes, even if smaller and more economical.

Another key challenge is that of unused and underutilised buildings. Transforming industrial

or disused spaces into liveable and thriving areas is complex, requiring careful planning, substantial investment, and community involvement. The Copenhagen Villages is an example of temporary utilisation of central, vacant spaces for small and affordable student housing.³² For vacant spaces like these, interviewees proposed the creation of an incentive structure motivating property owners and developers to repurpose buildings for housing or enhance their efficiency. Realdania is already paving the way by stating that, if their support is sought for new construction, the funding application must include an assessment of alternative approaches to new builds.³³ This can reduce resource waste and enhance social sustainability.

Finally, prevailing financial models must also be reimagined to align environmental, social, and economic sustainability. An innovative approach, exemplified by the tenant model developed by [Home.Earth](#)³⁴, offers unique opportunities for tenants. In this model, 15% of financial returns from housing projects is allocated to tenants, fostering a sense of co-ownership and shared financial incentives, as well as making the homes more affordable for different income groups. Home.Earth commits to never selling the properties, and shareholders should see enhanced returns from lower tenant turnover and reduced maintenance costs.

As Copenhagen moves forward on the green transition, there is a clear need for regulations that prioritise social justice and equity at the same level as environmental and economic considerations, so that marginalised communities also benefit from urban development and sustainability initiatives. The social risks and opportunities of the green transition in the built environment need to be defined, acknowledged, and prioritised to ensure a holistic and equitable approach to the right to housing in Copenhagen.

CONSTRUCTION WORKERS' RIGHTS

Workers' rights and conditions must sit at the heart of the sustainability agenda as they relate to how enterprises are governed, treat employees, and consequently commit to implementing socially responsible business.

Social aspects such as construction workers' rights and conditions, along with diversity in the value chain have not yet been prioritised to the same

extent as the economic and environmental pillars of sustainability. Interviewees 1 and 14 highlighted how this poses a problem for the two other pillars as it can lead to instability of business operations, consumer demand, public relations, employee retention, etc. and compromise the overall sustainability framework.

The BAT-Kartellet indicates that 15-20% of construction assignments contain some sort of violation of worker's rights. This involves tax avoidance as well as exploitation of vulnerable, often under-skilled, migrant workers.³⁵ This not only has social but also green transition repercussions as companies involved typically neglect investing in apprenticeships and up-skilling of workers' green competencies. Consequently, they may hinder, rather than support, the move towards a greener construction industry (Interview 14). The Council for Sustainable Construction is exploring how to include workers' conditions in their DGNB certification, and the Municipality of Copenhagen has had success with a risk-based control unit in their Corporate Social Responsibility division, with an 84% success rate in identifying non-compliant companies. Breaches of

worker rights are particularly common in construction projects with opaque and long supplier chains, or with smaller jobs such as asbestos remediation, where 31 cases of noncompliance were found out of the 55 investigated.³⁶

There are also challenges relating to diversity among workers throughout the built environment supply chain (Interviews 1, 8 and 14). While some investors prioritise diversity, the construction sector remains male-dominated. Women and sexual minorities are underrepresented on construction sites and across the wider industry. A homogeneous workforce results in a built environment designed for a narrower target group, one which often already benefits from systemic privilege. The Council for Sustainable Construction is in the process of developing a guide on implementing minimum worker rights guarantees within the construction industry (Interview 1). It is important to promote more initiatives to strengthen human rights due diligence throughout the supply chain, as well as developing indicators for workers' rights, inclusion and diversity.



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CONCLUSIONS

The pursuit of social sustainability in the decarbonisation and resilience of Copenhagen's built environment hinges on several actions. Although the city is considered to be relatively mature when it comes to the economic and environmental sustainability agenda³⁷, initiatives focused on the social dimension of sustainability are still relatively immature and risk being compromised.

The realisation of a just transition in the built environment requires a shared understanding of social risks and opportunities, as well as ambitious visions, targets, metrics and methods to serve as a framework for ensuring the benefits of climate action are equitably shared amongst citizens.

Copenhagen has a fertile environment for the emergence of this framework: in terms of urban governance, political will, educated and engaged civil society, business awareness, and impact investment appetite. Hence, there are multiple opportunities in this ecosystem to strengthen the social dimensions of sustainability. Consequently, there are various concrete steps that can be taken by built environment stakeholders in Copenhagen to leverage these opportunities. The following section proposes some of them for the public and private sectors.



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RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below are grouped by the alliances needed to achieve them. Diverse sectors must work together and collaborate in the pursuit of the suggested actions.

NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

- Creating socially inclusive, sustainable cities is complex work requiring collaboration of multiple stakeholders and levels of governance. It is necessary to involve multiple public institutions, such as ministries and agencies, as well as private sector organisations to develop a shared vision, agree competencies and allocate responsibilities. IHRB and Ramboll have taken a very first step towards this collaboration through the [visioning workshop](#) held in Copenhagen in September 2023. (Read the Key Insights from this Visioning Session [here](#)³⁸)
- Presently, due to the lower risks associated with new construction, it is easier and more cost-effective to secure a loan for demolishing and rebuilding a house rather than renovating it. These incentive mechanisms need to be reformed (e.g. through new legislation, tax incentives, or policy changes within the Danish Ministry of the Environment) to favour building reuse and transformation, as well as procurement processes with social clauses that take good working conditions into greater account.
- Set clear goals and visions for a green transition that is socially inclusive, and respects economic, social, and cultural rights. This can be put forward by establishing a department that systematically follows up on environmental, social and economic goals holistically, to monitor progress and ensure accountability.
- Continue monitoring the social impacts of the Parallel Societies Agreement, particularly for the most vulnerable. Based on these findings, ensure stronger citizen and local engagement, that displaced citizens retain access to strong social support and to affordable, high-quality housing³⁹, as well as strengthening social investments in civic infrastructure and civil engagement.
- Explore alternative approaches to unlock the huge social, economic, and cultural potential of socially exposed areas to enable a diverse city without relocating tenants. For example, preventing the privatisation of social (non-profit) housing and exploring the urban governance model of social urbanism⁴⁰ which prioritises investments in social and public infrastructure (public space, libraries, schools, hospitals, cultural centres, social support programmes, capacity building, etc.) over housing interventions, with the purpose of ameliorating the urban condition, while mitigating housing price increases.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

- The City of Copenhagen should introduce social safeguards so that building retrofits or new energy-efficient buildings don't increase prices for the most vulnerable nor demand so much that they are excluded from an area (e.g. requirements for participation in associations and boards, caps on rents or rental increases, - read more in [IHRB's City Toolkit](#)).⁴¹
- [Urban Development Copenhagen](#) (the Technical and Environmental Administration, of the City of Copenhagen)⁴², should focus on optimising the use of existing resources, by repurposing and building various types of housing in different sizes and for different needs and population groups e.g. elderly, children, disabled, low income people, etc).

New builds should be a last resort. As an inspiring example, London has developed its 'Circular Economy statement requirements' which requires that a building owner provides justification for demolition, and considers options to retain and refurbish the building instead.⁴³

- The municipality of Copenhagen should work more closely with citizens, civil society, investors and social housing organisations to prioritise affordable and sustainable housing for all citizens. This could include engaging more with local communities, promoting inclusivity, considering workers' well-being, assessing social impact through data, fostering collaborative partnerships, and exploring innovative financing models that protect the right to housing for all city dwellers.

BUSINESS AND FINANCE

- It is recommended that real estate developers, banks, and construction companies build for different ways of living, e.g. shared living arrangements and multigenerational uses, and switch from short-term to long-term returns on investment. Furthermore, investors are recommended to explore and implement financing and ownership models that support inclusive urban living: accommodating diverse demographics and socio-economic groups.
- In cooperation with built environment experts, civil society groups, and local government officials, develop more indicators and metrics on social aspects of sustainability. There is a great potential in developing better tools to collect social data e.g. citizens' needs and preferences which can (a) support citizen engagement processes, (b) inform investment decisions, and (c) better tailor built environment projects to the needs and wants of city dwellers.

APPENDIX: LIST OF INTERVIEWS

1. Director of Partnerships and Strategic Development, Council for sustainable construction
2. Architect and Founder of Sustainability department, Henning Larsen Architects
3. Chief Executive Officer, BLOXHUB
4. Secretariat Manager in AlmenNet, Danish Public Housing
5. Clean Construction Senior Advisor, C40 Cities
6. President of the Council for the Socially Vulnerable and Director of the "Home for Everyone"-Alliance
7. Associate Professor, SAXO-Institute - Archaeology, Ethnology, Greek & Latin, History, University of Copenhagen
8. Chief Executive Officer, the "Tunnel Fabric"
9. Co-founder – Sustainability, Home.Earth
10. ESG Manager, CPH City & Port Development
11. Representative, Housing and Planning Agency
12. Director, Housing and Economic Science Center, Realdania
13. Program Director, Future Cities – CONCITO
14. Secretariat director, BAT-Kartellet

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