

COUNCIL ON
URBAN
INITIATIVES

Creating
a legacy for
JUST,
HEALTHY
and **GREEN**
cities

2021-2025

Founding Partners

UN HABITAT
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE



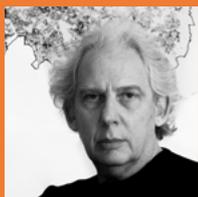
Institute for Innovation
and Public Purpose

LSE Cities

Supported by

Impact
on Urban
Health

Council on Urban Initiatives members



Ricky Burdett
(Co-Chair) Professor of Urban Studies and Director, LSE Cities, LSE London, UK



Mariana Mazzucato
(Co-Chair) Professor in the Economics of Innovation and Public Value and Founding Director, UCL IIPP London, UK



Yvonne Aki-Sawyer
Mayor
Freetown Sierra Leone



LaToya Cantrell
Mayor
New Orleans, USA



Chan Heng Chee
Professor, Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, Singapore



Ada Colau
Mayor 2015–2023
Barcelona, Spain



Liz Diller
Founding Partner, Diller Scofidio + Renfro
New York, USA



Leilani Farha
Global Director, The Shift
Ottawa, Canada



Dan Hill
Director, Melbourne School of Design
Melbourne, Australia



Alcinda Honwana
Department of Economic and Social Affairs at the United Nations Secretariat
New York, USA



Lesley Lokko
Founder and director of the African Futures Institute
Accra, Ghana



Claudia López
Mayor 2020–2023
Bogotá, Colombia



Rahul Mehrotra
Founding Principal, RMA Architects and Professor, Harvard Graduate School of Design
Boston, USA and Mumbai, India



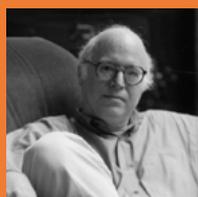
Maria Soledad Nuñez Mendez
Founder, Alma Cívica
Asunción, Paraguay



Fatma Şahin
Mayor
Gaziantep, Turkey



Saskia Sassen
Robert S. Lynd Professor, Columbia University
New York, USA



Richard Sennett
Chair, The London Centre for the Humanities
London, UK



Claudia Sheinbaum
President
Mexico

1. Objectives and outcomes of the Council on Urban Initiatives

Bringing urban leaders who have transformed their cities – from Barcelona to Bogota – together with activists, thinkers and practitioners creates a real opportunity to reimagine the way cities are planned, and decisions are made to make cities fairer, healthier and greener.

Constituted initially by an international group of 18 pioneering mayors, practitioners, designers, activists and academics, the Council on Urban Initiatives (the Council) was launched in 2021 with the aim of positioning urban issues at the heart of global debates; influencing agendas at the highest levels of the international community; and promoting experimentation for progressive policymaking at the city level.

Cities have long been sites of experimentation and innovation. However, they face unique environmental, fiscal and structural barriers. We recognise that a new approach is needed, grounded in the principles of equity, transparency and co-creation. This means a new understanding of value and consideration not just of how cities are designed, but also how the design is governed. Equity in both design and governance is necessary for a more inclusive and effective response to the intersecting health, sustainability and housing crises happening in our cities.

The Council's work centred on ambitious themes: **the just city, the green city and the healthy city**. Its work was guided by three main objectives: accelerating the pace and scale of urban change by highlighting barriers and new approaches; supporting the international community to advocate for cities; and engaging wider audiences in shaping urban agendas and futures.

Until its close in March 2025, the Council on Urban Initiatives convened members to discuss how to achieve health, sustainability and social justice in the urban context, culminating in five major reports. The Council has played a leading role at major international urban forums and conferences, reaching a truly global audience of urban policymakers and activists through its events.

Highlights include keynote sessions such as '[Shaping Equitable Urban Futures](#)' at the 11th World Urban Forum in Katowice, Poland, and at the UN-Habitat Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya; in Europe at the International Social Housing Festival in Barcelona, Spain, and at the Healthy City Design International Congress in Liverpool, UK. As part of its goal to engage in forums beyond traditional policymaking spaces, the Council co-hosted a symposium as part of the 2023 La Biennale di Venezia's 18th International Architecture Exhibition. '[Governing, Designing and Educating Urban Futures](#)' brought together mayors, social scientists, designers and educators to discuss how innovations in urban governance, planning and education can bring about transformative change, with an emphasis on socially progressive narratives.

Together, Council members developed new frameworks to drive progress toward the just, green and healthy city, and documented emerging positive examples of new practices and experimental thinking on how cities can do things differently.

This report presents a summary of the key insights generated by the Council's research and reflections, offering lessons to urban leaders across the globe to be even more ambitious and develop the skills to affect transformative change.

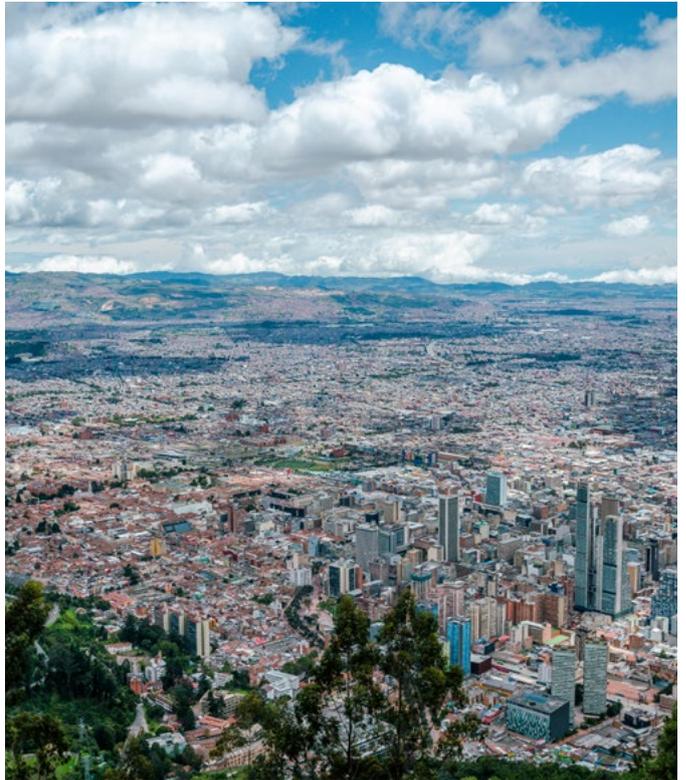
The Council has shown that cities are both powerful actors of change and sandboxes to experiment with new approaches to later scale. Interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral approaches are needed to challenge dominant paradigms in economics and design and to provide alternative ways forward.

The Council's contributions to the narrative of cities worldwide are already informing new streams of work. We hope its legacy will live on and evolve through new partnerships bringing together research and practice to drive urban change toward the just, sustainable, healthy city.

Ricky Burdett and Mariana Mazzucato

Co-Chairs, Council on Urban Initiatives

The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The signature on the left is for Ricky Burdett, featuring a large, stylized 'R' and 'B'. The signature on the right is for Mariana Mazzucato, with a more fluid, cursive style.



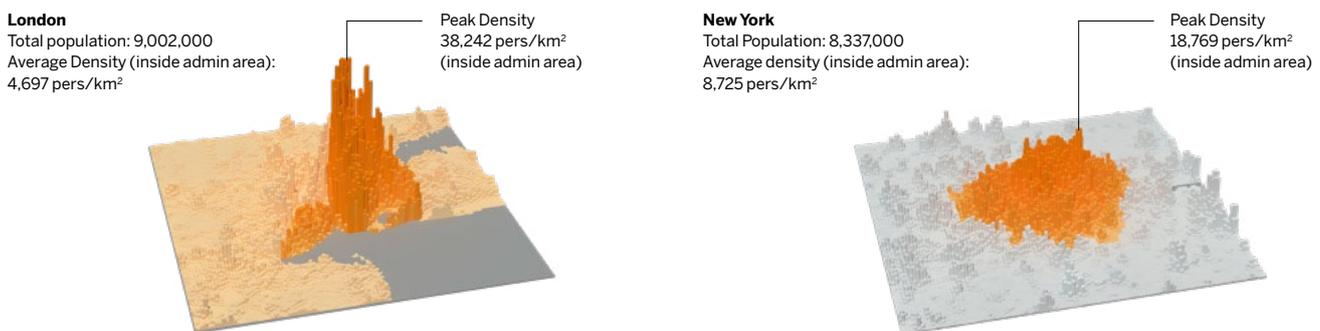
Council on Urban Initiatives events including the launch at the British Academy with address by UN Secretary-General António Guterres, event at the World Urban Forum in Katowice Mayor Şahin pictured speaking, and public symposium at the Venice Biennale, curated by Lesley Lokko with many members participating as panelists. Cities shown are Bogotá (top, credit Ryan Bellinson) and Mumbai (bottom, credit Phillip Rode).

2. Key insights from Council research reports

This collection of five papers examines contemporary urban development through diverse case studies and thematic lenses. The first theme, *mapping*, analyses the population dynamics and spatial patterns of 22 cities, as explored in *Council on Urban Initiatives* (Burdett and Mazzucato, 2021). The second theme, *care*, focuses on how cities respond to humanitarian needs, with *Shaping Urban Futures* (Burdett and Mazzucato, 2022) featuring case studies from Gaziantep, Turkey, and Bogotá, Colombia. The remaining three reports focus on *housing*. *The right to housing: A mission-oriented and human rights-based approach* (Mazzucato and Farha, 2023) discusses the fundamental right to adequate housing, while *Housing and the city: Case studies of integrated urban design* (Burdett, 2023) details five innovative projects in Barcelona, Spain, Bogotá, Colombia, Melbourne, Australia, Mumbai, India and Singapore. Lastly, *Modern Housing: an environmental common good* (Hill and Mazzucato, 2024) advocates for sustainable housing models to be treated as a common good. The following sections highlight the key takeaways and select cases from each report.

Figure 1. While New York City and London have the same population size (near 9 million), residents of the US city live at twice the density of the more spread-out UK capital

Source: [Burdett and Mazzucato, 2021](#)



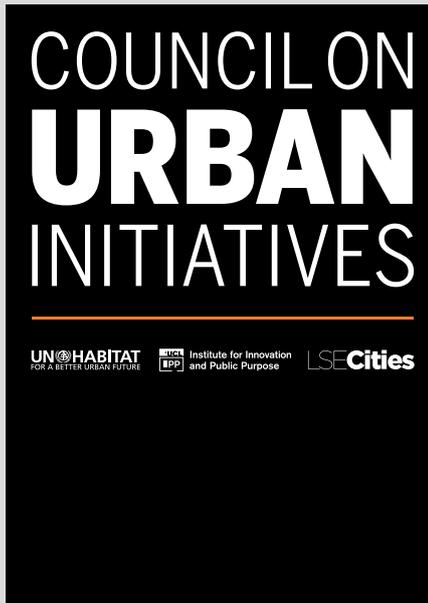
2.1 Mapping

City dynamics vary substantially across the globe, yet many urban governments face similar challenges.

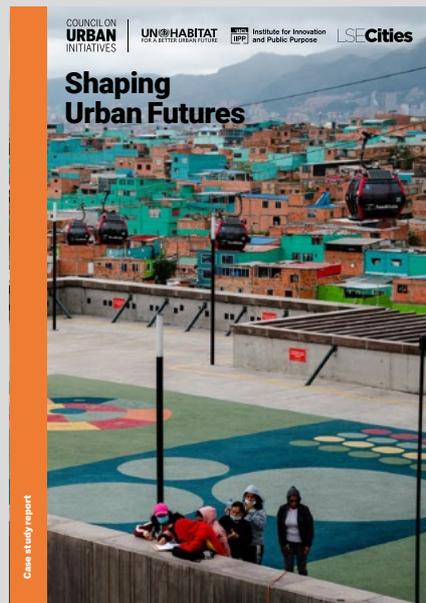
By 2050, 68% of the world's population is predicted to live in urban areas. Yet this growth will be uneven, with most occurring in parts of Africa and Asia. The Council's [launch report](#) (Burdett and Mazzucato, 2021) underscored the profound differences between cities at the demographic, spatial and political level, highlighting significant variations in sustainability, health and inequality. The speed of often unplanned growth in some cities of the Global South presents challenges to social and environmental infrastructure, while other cities have invested in effective planning regimes that contain growth within city boundaries and provide adequate services for their residents. Further, cities must account for different demographics, with life expectancies ranging from 57 years (in Freetown) to 85 years (in Hong Kong), while others have made varied progress transitioning to renewable energy (the proportion of electricity generated from renewable sources ranged from 0% in Jakarta to 88% in Bogotá) and have widely different unemployment rates (from 2% in Mumbai to 16% in Accra).

Despite their diverse spatial characteristics and trajectories, cities can draw insights from others' progress towards a more just, healthy and green city urban future, ensuring that individual responses are context-specific and co-created with local interest-holders.

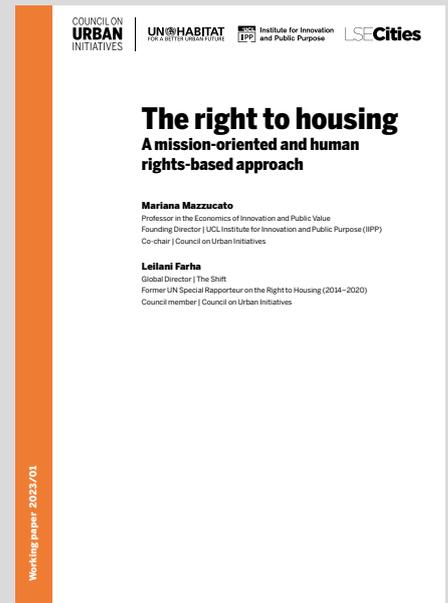
Reports by The Council on Urban Initiatives:



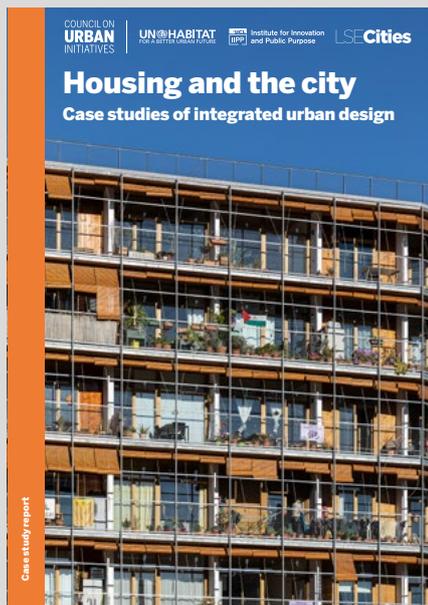
1. Burdett and Mazzucato, 2021



2. Burdett and Mazzucato, 2022



3. Mazzucato and Farha, 2023



4. Burdett, 2023



5. Hill and Mazzucato, 2024

Table 1. A range of social, environmental and spatial data underscore the differences and similarities between selected cities

Source: Burdett and Mazzucato, 2021

	 Population (thousands)	 Average annual growth rate (%)	 Birth rates per '000 population	 Young Population (%) (under 14s, 18s, or 19s)	 Homicide rate per 100,000 people	 Gini coefficient	 Foreign born population (as % of total)	 % of population with access to internet	 Unemployment rate pre-COVID-19 (%)	 % of the population with higher education	 Life expectancy	 Average annual particulate matter (PM2.5 µg/m³)	 Active physicians per 1,000 population	 Obesity rate (% of adult population)	 Diabetes rate (% of adult population)	 Emissions per capita (t CO2/cap)	 Renewable energy as percentage of total electricity (%)	 Car registrations (per 1,000 population)	 Daily water consumption (litres per capita)	 % of trips made by public transport	 Share of waste recycled (%)	 % of trips made by walking and cycling
Asunción	521	1.9	17.3	26.8	5.7	44	2.3	88	6.8	13	74.3	12	1.3	25.2	9.6	7.5	47	70.3	175	54.1	5	6.4
Bogotá	7,835	1.6	9.4	22.6	13.1	55.9	2.9	77	10.9	35	78	25	2.1	16.7	2.6	2.2	88.3	326	74.9	35.8	29.5	30.5
Mexico City	21,804	0.8	5.5	16.3	12.3	34.1	36.6	39.6	5	20.5	76.1	20.5	0.4	34	13.9	3.6	12.4	284.9	177	44	1.3	27
New Orleans	384	0.8	12.1	20.1	9.5	41	12.4	73.4	4.2	37.6	75.8	21	8.4	30	10.3	8.8	5	312.5	1412	8.2	3	8.3
New York	8,337	0.5	11.8	20.8	5.1	50.2	36.8	88.4	3.7	49.3	81.3	7	5.2	22	9.6	5.8	7.6	248	446.6	32	16.8	30.3
Ottawa	970	1.1	9.8	22.7	1.4	37	23.6	96.2	7.2	37.6	83.5	7.3	3.3	23.4	5.5	6	22.6	530.7	178	19.6	43	9.6
Hong Kong	7,395	0.7	5.8	13.6	0.4	54	39.3	93.9	2.9	34.5	85.4	20.3	2.1	29.9	8.4	5.3	0.2	108.1	137.5	88	34	5
Seoul	9,963	0.2	4.7	14.2	1.3	37.2	3.8	99.8	3.5	35.6	84.1	24.8	2.3	33	11.3	4.5	1.9	295.1	306	65	36	20.7
Shanghai	24,871	2.3	3.6	12.2	0.5	32.4	0.6	74.6	2.3	29.7	83.7	35.4	3	20	11.9	10.9	28	129.1	207.5	33	21.3	40
Singapore	5,454	0.9	8.5	19.6	0.1	37.5	28.9	89	2.3	58.3	83.9	19	2.5	8.7	8.6	9.2	0.5	171.2	141	44	59	23
Jakarta	10,517	1.5	17	23.8	0.3	40.1	1.9	63.4	6.2	14.8	70.8	49.4	0.2	30	6.3	2.7	0	406.6	130.4	10	7.5	N/A
Kuala Lumpur	7,564	2.4	15.2	20.1	1.7	45.2	12.3	95.5	2.6	25.8	77	21.6	1.5	19.7	17.4	3.3	8.8	534.9	288	22.5	10.4	N/A
Mumbai	19,980	1.6	15.3	20.3	2.2	24.5	0.6	61	1.9	18.7	73.5	45.3	0.8	23.6	11.8	1.8	26	248	165.7	70	N/A	33
Accra	5,055	2.2	20.3	26.8	2	35	1.7	17.3	16.3	11.2	61.1	30.3	0.1	25.1	1.8	1.1	0.3	70	134.6	30	5	54.4
Addis Ababa	4,794	4.4	22.3	25.9	4.6	32.4	1	87.4	14.5	20	65.5	20.1	0.08	1	6.5	5.6	25.8	81	110	31	6.3	54
Freetown	1,202	2.9	26	32.6	1.7	18	1.3	51.4	4.7	15.8	57.2	56	0.02	8.7	2.4	1.1	58	25	96.1	48	N/A	N/A
Barcelona	1,664	0.6	8.2	20.2	0.6	31.7	20.1	96.5	10.7	31.8	82.7	16.6	3.16	14.2	12.2	1.7	18	273	107	40.1	21.2	35.2
Istanbul	15,462	1.3	12.3	28	1.8	45.1	1.3	96.4	23	19.8	78.7	16.5	2	21.1	11.1	3.2	18	195	190	28	6	45
London	9,002	1.1	12.8	23.7	1.3	31.9	37	99.4	4.6	37.6	82.5	11.4	3.6	22.5	6.5	3.7	24.6	308	164	35.2	33.6	26.8
Paris	12,213	0.6	12	16.4	1.2	44.3	20.2	95.9	6.3	63	82.8	14.7	4.2	10.7	4.1	2.5	26.9	197	120	26	20.7	67
Stockholm	976	1.3	12.1	22.9	1.1	43.3	25.5	95.5	3.6	38.4	82.8	6.1	4.5	10	4.8	1.5	63	361	94.6	29	19.1	28

2.2 Care

City leaders have shown remarkable agility in experimenting with innovative solutions to address complex, interconnected challenges.

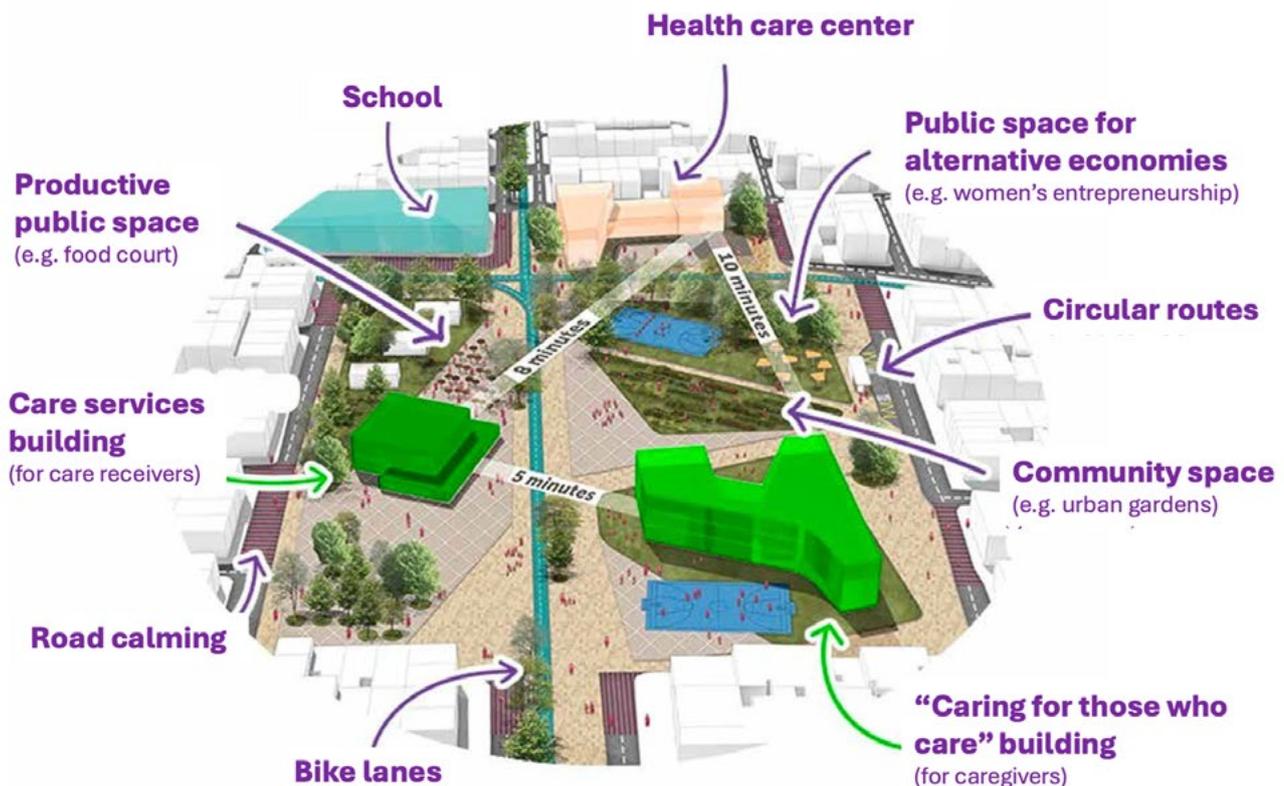
Cities are often at the forefront of responding to crises such as pandemics, climate breakdown, migration, conflict and deep social inequality. Yet in these landscapes, cities around the world have demonstrated that it is possible to radically transform uncertainty into opportunities for lasting change. *Shaping Urban Futures* (Burdett and Mazzucato 2022) details positive case studies from the cities represented by the council. It includes the refugee integration response in Gaziantep, Turkiye, which absorbed 500,000 refugees in a short period of time, and the innovative care system in Bogotá, Colombia, which provides inspiration for other city leaders to build capabilities for change. Here, we highlight Bogotá's efforts.

Bogotá's care system

Context: Bogotá is one of Latin America's largest cities, with a high proportion of the population living in informal settlements with large families. The city has entrenched gender norms that reinforce inequalities and impact daily lives. In Bogotá, much of the city's female population are full-time unpaid caregivers, of which 90% are low income; 33% lack time for self-care and 70% are deprived of pursuing education. Bogotá has embarked on a transformative journey to address this.

Figure 2. Concept of the Bogotá care system with amenities within close proximity

Source: City of Bogotá, 2023



Actions	Mayor Claudia López tasked the Bogotá Secretariat for Women with designing the care system and taking a long-term view. The secretariat conducted in-depth research and engagement across local government, with external organisations and funders, and directly with caregivers and care recipients. These insights were used to inform the new care system model.
Care system	Bogotá's care system reorganises and integrates public services and physical infrastructure, recognising the care economy as an essential public good. It clusters dozens of existing services, such as daycare, education, health and psychological support, into care blocks. To promote accessibility these are within a 30-minute walk from residential areas. For caregivers unable to leave home, the system provides home-based support through door-to-door care, while care buses increase access for those in rural and underserved areas. Childcare and on-site laundry facilities enhance accessibility by supporting caregivers while they use other services. The original plan envisaged 45 care blocks across the city by 2035.
Enabling process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="663 573 1452 674">– Flexible finance: During COVID-19, Bogotá received flexible financial support from international donors and NGOs. This allowed innovative practices to be tested rapidly in ways that would not be possible under conventional budgetary and fiscal processes. <li data-bbox="663 707 1452 842">– Experimentation practice: The Secretariat for Women encouraged decision-makers to develop, implement and test new ideas quickly, rather than waiting for exhaustive policy approval. This shift enabled rapid establishment of multiple care blocks 'on the ground', while fostering a long-term, learning-oriented government. <li data-bbox="663 875 1452 1032">– Capabilities for cross-sectoral integration: The care system confronted bureaucratic challenges by fostering shared stewardship among stakeholders, rewarding collaboration, and developing new professional and institutional capabilities. This included breaking down administrative silos through initiatives such as the Intersectional Commission, where 13 government secretariats coordinate strategic and technical decisions. <li data-bbox="663 1066 1452 1189">– Synthesising spatial distribution within the care system: The care system is fully integrated into Bogotá's master plan, contributing to the realisation of innovative policies like the 30-minute city. Collaboration between different departments has helped improve the social impact of the city's progressive urban development strategy.
Impact	Since its launch in 2020, Bogotá's care system has opened 23 care blocks, and provided services to caregivers and recipients, offering skills training, and legal and mental health services support. Beneficiaries report not only practical and economic benefits, but also deeper psychological impacts that promote empowerment, social connection and visibility.

The critical lessons from Bogotá's care system are:

- **Experiment quickly:** Prototypes should be tested early to generate data, learn, iterate and improve. This allowed for the initiative to scale quickly.
- **Prioritise developing capabilities for innovation:** Innovation is uncertain, so soft skills and collaborative capabilities should not be underestimated.
- **Transcend sectoral policies to affect systems change:** Convening different local government departments and sharing financing can facilitate systems change.
- **Institutionalise processes beyond short-term political cycles.** Political will, shared responsibility and experimental mindsets should be embedded throughout policy design and implementation to create longstanding change.
- **Incorporate a gendered perspective within care policies:** Applying a gendered lens can result in radically different policies and more equitable systems.

2.3 Housing

To solve the global housing crisis, cities must lead mission-oriented, rights-based responses.

Housing is a fundamental human right and a significant challenge faced by cities across the globe, requiring fresh thinking and new approaches. *The right to housing: A mission-oriented and human rights based approach* (Mazzucato and Farha, 2023) asserts that achieving the right to housing requires addressing its multiple characteristics, from affordability to sustainability.

Figure 3. Characteristics of the right to housing

Source: Mazzucato and Farha, 2023



* Sustainability has recently been recognised by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to housing, but is not included in the definition under international human rights law.

While the human rights approach invokes legal accountability, it becomes more powerful when paired with the ambition of entrepreneurial states in a mission-oriented approach. Combined, this results in the Right to Housing Missions Framework.

The Right to Housing Missions Framework comprises six pillars:

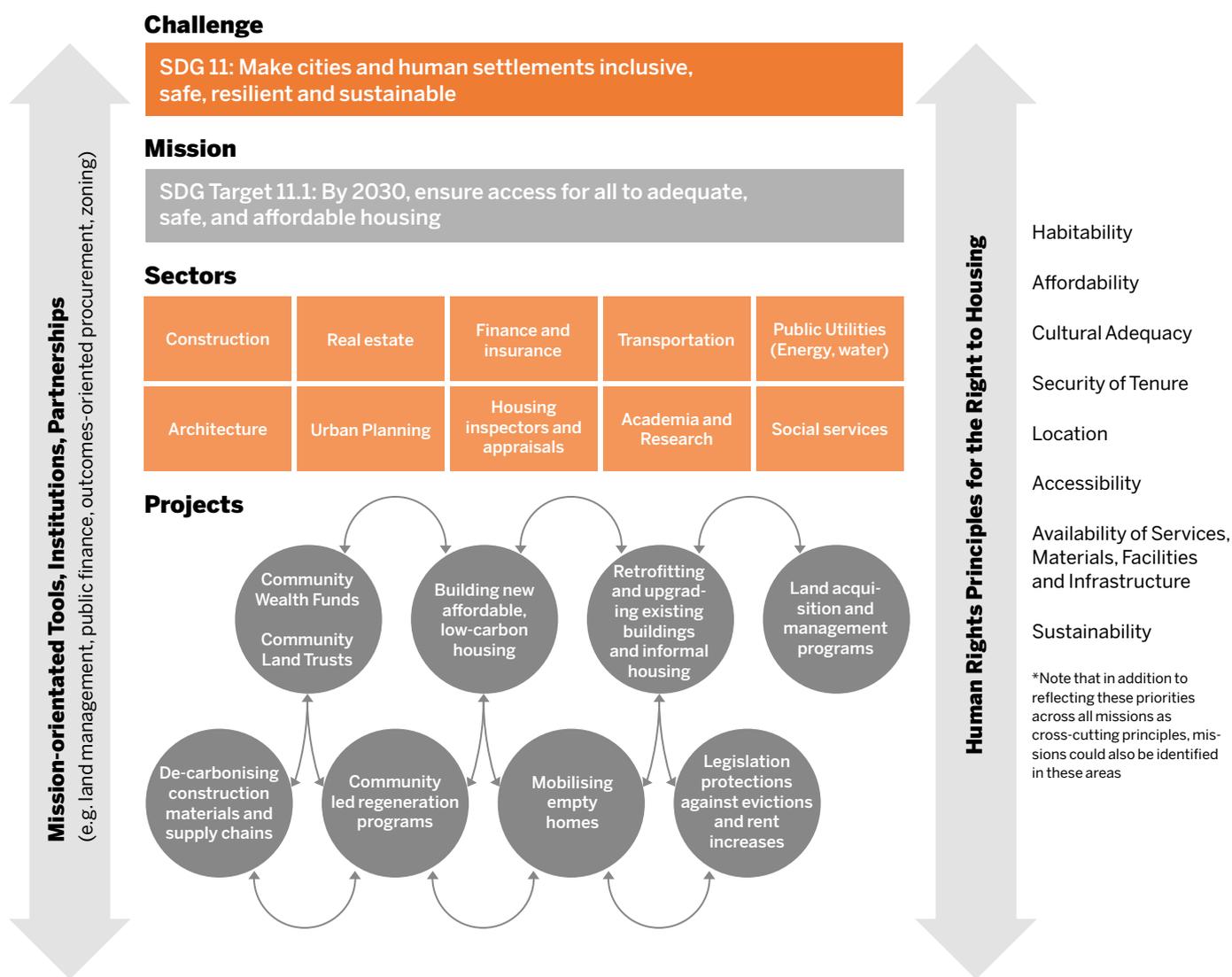
- 1. Commit to a housing mission:** Set a bold housing-for-all mission and use human rights principles to design the approach to reach it.
- 2. Shape housing market:** Put value creation at the centre of a common good approach to reshaping the market.
- 3. Build an entrepreneurial state:** Take an ambitious, whole-of-government approach to develop the capabilities, institutions and policies needed to deliver missions and meet human rights obligations.
- 4. Public, private, third sector partnerships for the common good:** Regulate and design symbiotic partnerships that further the mission goals, pool complementary resources, and share risks and rewards.
- 5. Public value-driven financing and taxation:** Deploy patient, long-term, outcome-focused public finance focused on missions and human rights outcomes.
- 6. Ensure monitoring and accountability:** Ensure accountability for delivering on the housing mission through human rights legal obligations and transparent, robust and independent monitoring.

In developing housing missions, it is critical to apply the pillars to all components of the mission and to dynamically assess how different components are working.

Urban leaders must recognise that housing crises stem from a complex interplay of economic policies, market dynamics and state interventions, leading to uneven impacts across communities. Too often, governments rely on narrow metrics, such as housing supply targets that fail to capture the broader dimensions of the right to housing. To maximise public value, policymakers should adopt a whole-of-government approach that integrates economic, social, and rights-based considerations. Cities such as Barcelona and the London Borough of Camden demonstrate the power of mission-oriented, rights-based strategies that prioritise long-term public benefit over short-term market outcomes. By fostering cross-sector collaboration and innovative governance, urban leaders can advance housing policies that are effective, equitable and sustainable.

Figure 4. Example of a housing mission map with human rights principles

Source: Mazzucato and Farha, 2023



Pioneering initiatives have delivered inclusive and sustainable housing that is integrated within the city.

The way in which housing is procured, financed, designed and allocated has significant implications for the lives of all urban residents. *Housing and the city: Case studies of integrated urban design* (Burdett, 2023) details five innovative cases that deliver inclusive, sustainable and integrated housing solutions that reshape the urban landscape.

These pioneering initiatives demonstrate cities' potential to safeguard equity and sustainability through holistic approaches to housing. The spatial distribution of housing is critical to broader social inclusion. Their design, procurement and funding highlight the relevance of incremental and iterative development, and the significance of integrating housing and mixed-use neighbourhoods within the broader city. They are also a reminder that to deliver such collective public value, city governments need to be empowered through funding and governance structures.



Shared facilities for residents within the La Borda social housing complex in Barcelona
Source: Alvaro Valdecantos

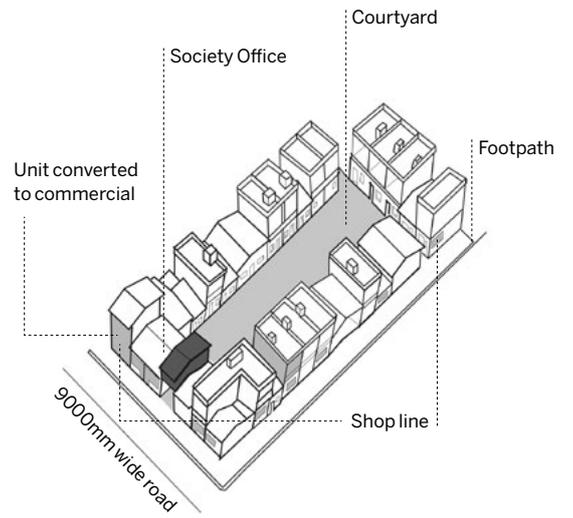
In addition to showcasing the Nightingale housing project (Melbourne, Australia) and Plan Terrazas (Bogota, Colombia) in the report, here we highlight three diverse but equally inspiring case studies from Barcelona, Mumbai and Singapore.

La Borda Housing Cooperative – Barcelona, Spain

La Borda Housing Cooperative demonstrates how high-quality social housing can be woven into existing cities, ensuring inclusivity and the right to housing. Different from most social housing that provides bare minimum amenities, La Borda creatively prioritises daylight, common space, and quality facilities and materials to enhance social connection and meet the needs of families living in the city. This initiative was part of a broader regeneration plan for the industrial Can Batlló site, following citizen activism that occupied an unused building in the district and ultimately renovated the building, showcasing community power. In 2016, Barcelona launched their first Right to Housing Plan, which aimed to restructure the housing system to ensure access to decent and affordable housing. This led to the city's expropriation of land, providing publicly owned land for social and public housing, such as the cooperative that manages La Borda. Residents of La Borda enjoy quality, affordable housing, with access to a vibrant neighbourhood with amenities.

Sites and Services Scheme – Mumbai, India

The Charkop Sites and Services Scheme in North Mumbai is a testament to the potential of incremental urban development in a city whose typical housing response includes high-rise 'vertical slums'. Launched in 1979 as part of a broader World Bank-funded project, the Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority sold small plots of land, some with ground floor housing units, to low- and middle-income residents with the goal of residents building out their own homes over time.



Housing courtyard and street frontage in the Sites and Services Scheme, Mumbai, India

Source: Harvard Mellon Urban Initiative (left), Mehotra and Mehta 2018 (right)



Outdoor playgrounds and exercise facilities for the elderly are fully integrated with the high-rise residential blocks of Punggol New Town, located next to a metro station, local shops and food outlets

Source: Housing Development Board Singapore

While half of the units were occupied by people with very low incomes and a further 10-20% on low incomes, the scheme attracted other income groups through a range of plot sizes, pricing and payment plans, which subsidised the scheme. Expansion of the city core and improved transport led to higher than planned densities, nearly all units were built-out by homeowners, and shops and services were established along streets and public spaces, contributing to a dynamic, mixed-use urban neighbourhood, with schools, social and sports facilities in close proximity to the housing units. The Charkop experience highlights the importance of a flexible framework and iterative design in creating sustainable urban environments.

Punggol New Town – Singapore

Within the compact island city-state, Singapore's Punggol New Town is one of several pioneering housing initiatives that the state has built on publicly owned lands, which comprise 90% of the country. The Land Acquisition Act (1966) allowed the government to buy land at below market rates, increasing its public housing stock such that more than 80% of residents now live in publicly developed housing units, typically owner-occupied on 99-year leases. Given the scale of residents living in Singapore's New Towns and housing developments, urban planners have prioritised wider social and environmental objectives to avoid developing soulless housing projects. For example, Punggol New Town exhibits a 'village' feel, with the Punggol Waterway serving as both a flood mitigation mechanism, and a recreational and active transport corridor between different parts of the New Town. A 'town hub' is a one-stop community facility with amenities, including a hawker centre, library, health services, sports facilities and more. Its progressive delivery allows for continual modernisation to meet evolving demographics and needs.

Housing should be treated as a common good for people and planet.

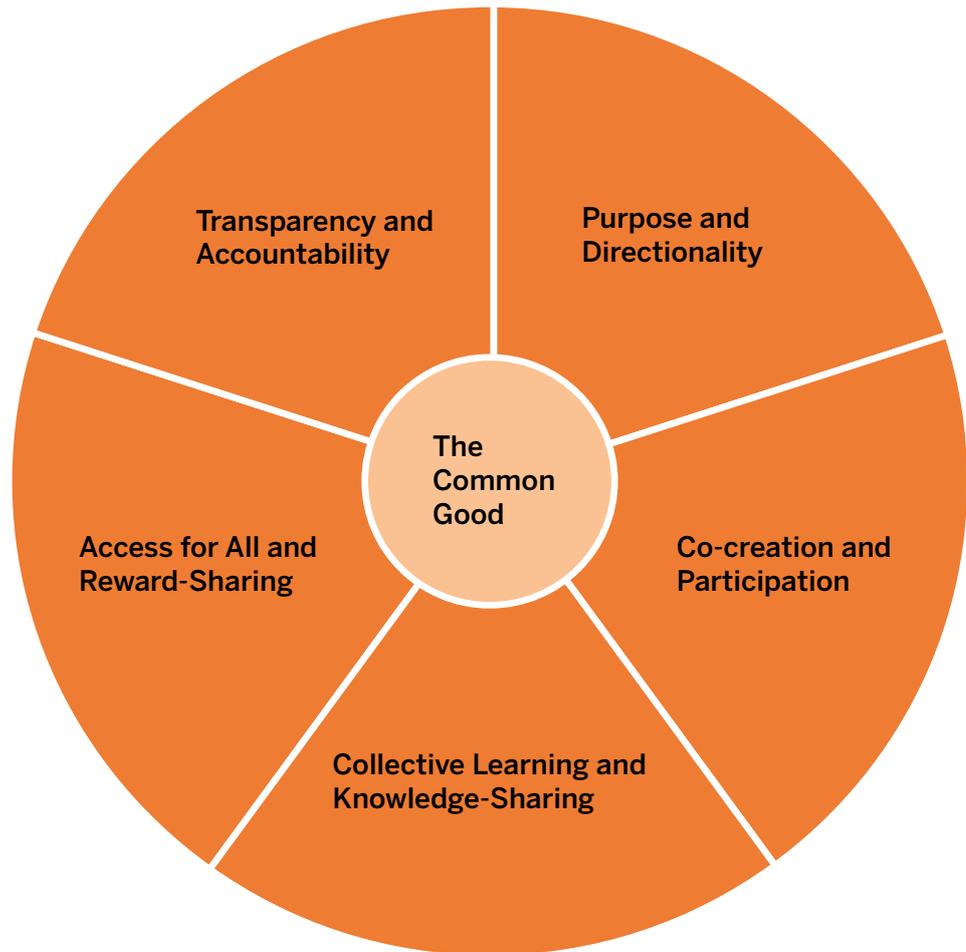
Housing is inextricably linked with environmental, economic and social systems, presenting both challenges and opportunities. *Modern Housing: an environmental common good* (Hill and Mazzucato, 2024) outlines how current housing systems prioritise financial returns for investors and developers over people and the planet. This is strongest in financialised housing sectors in high-income countries, where private sector housing dominates. Irresponsible development, poor community engagement and overly permissive regulations have led to architectural and urban design practices that foster inequality, exclusion and harmful environmental impacts.

The paper proposes a bold rethinking of housing as a common good, which would see housing sectors with far more public and social housing, and societal benefits, founded on pillars of purpose, co-creation, collective learning, reward-sharing and accountability.

Retrofitting: In addressing housing crises, retrofitting should be prioritised over new construction due to the environmental toll of new builds, including carbon emissions and land extraction. Beyond enhancing the resiliency of homes to climate change, retrofit considers the redistribution of existing spaces, such as vacant homes and commercial buildings. This approach has implications for land management, planning and construction, which will differ between formal and informal settlements. Further, retrofit initiatives must safeguard longstanding regional community ties, ensuring that the urgency of human migration does not result in defaulting to conventional development models.

Fig 8. Pillars of the common good

Source: [Mazzucato, 2023](#)



Building: New housing, when required, must move beyond business-as-usual speculative development and profit-driven models. Instead, it should be publicly owned and incorporate new models, such as cooperative approaches. As with retrofitting, design should be rooted in community participation, empowering local groups through self-build options that use modern methods of construction that are environmentally responsible and adaptable for future needs. Recognising housing as an environmental common good allows mission-oriented policies to shape principles for design and governance. These policies must account for the interdependence of the Global North and Global South, not only through supply chains and financial systems, but also in disproportional contributions to, and impacts of, climate change. A just transition requires rethinking housing as a driver of climate resilience, integrating sustainable construction, public financing and global cooperation.

Housing should not be treated as a commodity to generate profits for the few, but as a common good foundational to social and environmental justice. The paper contends that retrofitting existing structures and reusing materials for sustainable construction should take priority over new, mass building programmes, urging practitioners and policymakers to investigate and experiment with alternative housing models that are designed around shared living, diverse tenure options and new governance models.

Table 2. Nine design principles for common good housing missions

Source: Hill and Mazzucato, 2024

<p>Retrofitting first Retrofit first, via circular biomaterials, nature-based infrastructures and participative co-design with people, place and environment, recognising the rights of people to remain in place rather than be displaced by external forces, removing operational emissions while retaining embodied carbon and interconnected biodiversity, and reinforcing the social and cultural fabric.</p>	<p>Moving second Wherever the climate and biodiversity crisis makes existing settlements uninhabitable, ensure dignified, secure, inclusive, affordable and sustainable housing is made available for those displaced, carefully integrated into retrofit neighbourhoods and supporting social infrastructures, and with care taken in terms of governance and co-design, ensuring culturally diverse possibilities.</p>	<p>Adapting third Ensure the right to self-build, repair and adapt at both housing and neighbourhood scale, via open building systems, shared common good infrastructures, new skills and trades, engaged policy, and legible supply chains for materials and resources, allowing existing environments to refine in place and new housing to adapt.</p>
<p>Circular biomaterials Whether retrofit or new-build, prioritise biomaterials from regenerative sources, produced, installed and maintained, and reused to high standards. Source locally wherever possible and from locally managed sustainable environments, and produce, maintain and recycle under dignified and safe labour conditions, creating new forms of employment, trades and cultural activity.</p>	<p>Definancialised markets Create an even balance of housing across public, social and private sectors, with diverse types, tenure and land ownership, removing financialisation's imperative for over-building. Make existing under-utilised spaces more openly available. Direct sustainable building sectors via collaborative public leadership, procurement and operations.</p>	<p>Legible systems Ensure a new "right to the city" incorporates the rights of the environment itself, by developing open, interoperable, legible systems to track provenance, performance and permissions of habitats, materials, resource flows and building/land use. Develop new common good "balance sheets" based on smart contracts for shared assets and activities.</p>
<p>Convivial infrastructures Prioritise planning for harmonious density that unlocks sustainable common good outcomes, where housing design integrates diverse, high-quality and well-maintained social infrastructures, alongside shared systems for active mobility, public transport, renewable energy, on-site water storage and green/blue infrastructure, food production and local waste loops, facilitated by accessible public digital services.</p>	<p>Open buildings Deploy advanced biomaterial-oriented fabrication systems for construction and retrofit, from open digitally enabled community-scale self-build and repair systems operated, maintained and resourced locally, through to large-scale industrial modular and automated fabrication and construction systems for larger buildings and infrastructure, linked to legible, equitable and regenerative material supply chains in both instances.</p>	<p>Systemic governance Ensure systemic perspective to design, construction and governance of housing incorporates integration of these linked infrastructures and practices, working systemically across house, block, neighbourhood, city, region, nation and global scale, recognising that these are all the same system from a planetary boundaries perspective.</p>

3. Council impact and legacy

The Council has shown that cities are both powerful actors of change and sandboxes for experimenting with new approaches. The Council demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral approaches to challenge dominant paradigms in economics and design, and to provide alternative paths toward the green, just, healthy city.

‘Being part of the Council on Urban Initiatives was a rare opportunity to step outside the ‘sucking mud’ of everyday challenges in Africa’s urban environments, and to see and hear perspectives from other parts of the world. Through reading, dialogue and gatherings, it was energising to understand that our challenges are not unique or insurmountable. The Council’s insistence on equal and valuable representation from the Global South and emerging urbanities made it uniquely relevant to a wide group of professionals. It was an opportunity to de-couple expertise from the silos of economics, architecture, urbanism, policy and politics, and start thinking across disciplines, rather than within. I will greatly miss the jolts of intellectual and inspirational adrenaline.’

Prof Lesley Lokko, Founder and Chair, African Futures Institute

‘The focus on housing has been incredibly important. Housing brings together environmental and social justice very directly, and cannot be “solved” from any one discipline. The Council’s multi-perspectival composition allowed us to approach housing from the point of view of public policy, economics, politics, activism, architecture, urbanism, planning, materials and systems – all simultaneously. There are few groups that can pull together these perspectives around cities. The Council provided a platform for a diverse group (North and South) to come together around the challenges of urban environments, in open and engaged ways.’

Dan Hill, Director, Melbourne School of Design

‘The Council on Urban Initiatives’ research reframes how we think about urban challenges, and highlights the pioneering work happening in cities around the world to achieve a just, green and healthy future for their residents. This strong collaboration resulted in real impact for UN Habitat and the global urban community. We will take these ideas forward as we advocate for better quality of life for all in an urbanising world.’

Anacláudia Rossbach, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director,
United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)

The relationships and insights from the council are already informing the work of the founding partner organisations. This includes LSE Cities’ European Cities programme, which aims to accelerate government innovation across the continent, and UCL IIPP’s [Public Sector Capabilities Index](#), which is identifying the dynamic capabilities needed for transformative policymaking in the 21st century.

Nightingale ParkLife (Austin Maynard Architects)
and Nightingale Evergreen (Clare Cousins
Architects) apartment buildings and the
surrounding urban context.
© Tom Ross



References

- Burdett, R. and Mazzucato, M. (2021). *Council on Urban Initiatives*. Council on Urban Initiatives. Available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/public-purpose/publications/2022/jan/council-urban-initiatives>
- Burdett, R. and Mazzucato, M. (2023). *Shaping Urban Futures*. Council on Urban Initiatives. Available at: <https://councilonurbaninitiatives.com/resources/shaping-urban-futures>
- Burdett, R. (Ed.). (2023). *Housing and the City: case studies of integrated urban design*. Council on Urban Initiatives. Available at: <https://councilonurbaninitiatives.com/resources/housing-and-the-city-case-studies-of-integrated-urban-design>
- Hill, D. and Mazzucato, M. (2024). *Modern Housing: An environmental common good*. Council on Urban Initiatives (CUI WP 2024-02) and UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose Working Paper Series (IIPP WP 2024-03). Available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/public-purpose/publications/2024/mar/modern-housingenvironmental-common-good>
- Mazzucato, M. (2023). 'Governing the economics of the common good: from correcting market failures to shaping collective goals', *Journal of Economic Policy Reform*, 27(1), pp. 1-24. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17487870.2023.2280969>
- Mazzucato, M. and Farha, L. (2023). *The right to housing: A mission-oriented and human rights-based approach*. Council on Urban Initiatives (CUI WP 2023-01) and UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose Working Paper Series (IIPP WP 2023-07). Available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/public-purpose/publications/2023/may/right-housing-mission-oriented-and-human-rights-based-approach>

Council members

Ricky Burdett (Co-Chair), Director, LSE Cities, London, UK

Mariana Mazzucato (Co-Chair), Founding Director, UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose, London, UK

Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr, Mayor of Freetown, Sierra Leone

LaToya Cantrell, Mayor, New Orleans, USA

Chan Heng Chee, Professor, Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, Singapore

Ada Colau, Mayor of Barcelona, (2015-2023), Spain

Liz Diller, Founding Partner, Diller Scofidio + Renfro, New York City, USA

Leilani Farha, Global Director, The Shift, Ottawa, Canada

Dan Hill, Director, Melbourne School of Design, Melbourne, Australia

Alcinda Honwana, Inter-Regional Advisor, UN DESA, New York City, USA

Lesley Lokko, Founding Director, Africa Futures Institute, Accra, Ghana

Claudia López, Mayor of Bogotá (2020-2023), Colombia

Rahul Mehrotra, Founding Principal, RMA Architects, Mumbai, India

Soledad Nuñez, Founder, Alma Cívica, Paraguay

Fatma Şahin, Mayor, Gaziantep, Türkiye

Saskia Sassen, Robert S. Lynd Professor, Columbia University, New York City, USA

Richard Sennett, Chair, London Centre for the Humanities

Claudia Sheinbaum, President of Mexico and Mayor of Mexico City (2018-2023), Mexico

Founding partners

LSE Cities, London School of Economics and Political Science

UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose

UN-Habitat

Secretariat

Cassandra Mah, UCL IIPP

Louise Ellaway, LSE Cities

Past secretariat members

Isadora Schapell-Spillman, UCL IIPP

Luis Hernán Sáenz, UCL IIPP

Esteban Alvarez Diaz, UCL IIPP

Ryan Bellinson, UCL IIPP

Gyorgyi Galik, UCL IIPP

Nikolett Puskas, UCL IIPP

Eduardo González de Molina, UCL IIPP

Catalina Duarte, LSE Cities

Tayo Isa-Daniel, LSE Cities

Alexandra Gomes, LSE Cities

Rebecca Flynn, LSE Cities

UN Habitat

Edlam Abera Yemeru

Feliep Decorte

Cerin Kizhakkethottam

Matthew Benn

Publication credits

Editing: Cassandra Mah, UCL IIPP

Graphic design: Atelier Works

With kind support from Impact on Urban Health

Antonia Orr

James Shearman

COUNCIL ON **URBAN** INITIATIVES

From 2021-2025, the Council on Urban Initiatives was a research and advocacy platform supporting international, national and local actors to deliver transformative shifts towards a better urban future. The Council's work centred on three interrelated themes: environmental sustainability (the green city), health and well-being (the healthy city) and social justice (the just city). Co-organised by UN-Habitat, UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose (IIPP) and LSE Cities, the Council comprised of mayors, academics and practitioners, and was co-chaired by Ricky Burdett (LSE) and Mariana Mazzucato (UCL-IIPP).

Organising Partners



The UN-Habitat's vision of 'a better quality of life for all in an urbanising world' is bold and ambitious. UN-Habitat works with partners to build inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities and communities. UN-Habitat collaborates with governments, intergovernmental, UN agencies, civil society organisations, foundations, academic institutions and the private sector to achieve enduring results in addressing the challenges of urbanisation.



The Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose (IIPP) at University College London rethinks the role of the state in driving innovation and shaping markets to tackle global challenges. Through cutting-edge research, teaching, and policy partnerships, IIPP challenges traditional economic thinking and defines new interactions between theory and practice. Working with governments and public institutions around the world, IIPP helps shape the design of outcomes-oriented policies that create inclusive, sustainable, and innovation-led growth.



LSE Cities is an international centre that investigates the complexities of the contemporary city. It carries out research, graduate and executive education, outreach and advisory activities in London and abroad. Extending LSE's century-old commitment to the understanding of urban society, LSE Cities investigates how complex urban systems are responding to the pressures of growth, change and globalisation with new infrastructures of design and governance, that both complement and threaten social equity and sustainable equity.

Knowledge Partner



Impact on Urban Health is a place-based funder, focused on improving health in inner-city areas by understanding and changing how inequalities impact our health. Rooted in the London boroughs of Lambeth and Southwark, some of the most diverse areas in the world, it invests, tests and builds understanding of how cities can be shaped to support better health.