

Prosfygika: The community that EU policy forgot to invent



ACAN Greece

In June 2025, the Region of Attica announced a plan to use European Regional Development Fund money to build social housing in central Athens. There was one problem: the site was already home to 400 people, organised as a self-governed community, running their own health clinic, bakery, nursery, cinema and solidarity guest house, for sixteen years, at no cost to the state. The plan did not propose to work with them. It proposed to evict them.

The way the EU is talking about and dealing with housing is changing significantly. The [European Parliament's resolution of March 2026 on the housing crisis](#) is, by any measure, an ambitious document. It acknowledges that millions of Europeans live in precarious conditions, that rents have risen by nearly 29% since 2010 while house prices have jumped over 60%, that around 1.3 million people are homeless on any given night across the EU, 400,000 of them children. It calls for decent, sustainable and affordable housing as a social priority, not just an economic one.

Crucially, the resolution goes beyond supply-side fixes. It explicitly recognises cooperative, non-profit and community-led housing models as legitimate responses to the crisis. It warns against regeneration policies that displace long-standing residents. It calls on member states to protect the social fabric of neighbourhoods and to support housing as a

commons, not just a commodity. Significant EU funds, through cohesion policy, InvestEU, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, are being mobilised behind these commitments.

This is not small progress. After decades in which housing was framed as a commodity – and thus a market problem to be addressed with market solutions, institutional recognition is just beginning to broaden its scope to include the radical idea that communities, not just developers, have a role in shaping where and how people live.

In close proximity to the Parliament, the European Commission has been working on a vision of what the built environment should feel like, not just function as. The New European Bauhaus initiative, launched by the European Commission in 2021, [promotes solutions that are not only sustainable, but also inclusive and beautiful, while respecting the diversity of places, traditions, and cultures in Europe and beyond.](#)

Its three core values are sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion – each understood more broadly than the words suggest. Sustainability, understood not only as energy efficiency but as the long-term **stewardship of places, materials and communities**. Aesthetics, understood not as decoration but as the **quality of everyday experience, whether a place invites care, encounter, and belonging**. And inclusion, understood as the **genuine participation of all people in shaping the spaces they inhabit, regardless of income, origin or status**.

For some of us, these words describe a place that already exists: a community in the centre of Athens, which is why we wrote a proposal, nominating it for the [NEB prize](#). Prosfygika -the name means “Homes of the Refugees” – was built in the 1930s as state social housing for Greek refugees from Asia Minor. For the past 16 years, it has housed those who would otherwise have none. Today it is home to 400 residents, Greeks, immigrants and refugees, from 27 countries, speaking 20 languages and representing diverse religions and cultures, who organise daily life through communal ownership, collective care, solidarity, inclusion and consent-based decision-making. For more than half of them, It is self-governed through open assemblies, working groups and a Women’s Assembly that holds full decision-making power.

Sustainability, in Prosfygika, is not a design principle applied from outside but a practice that emerges from necessity. Residents maintain their homes through low-tech, materially efficient repairs using traditional materials – lime, stone, brick – prioritising retrofit over demolition. Shared spaces, shared tools, shared services reduce individual consumption. On-site healthcare, childcare, food provision and cultural activity reduce the need to go elsewhere. The existing building stock – ninety years old and Bauhaus-listed – is preserved and extended rather than replaced. This is circularity not as a policy target but as a daily habit, born from limited resources and collective responsibility.

Aesthetics, in Prosfygika, is what happens when people care for a place because it is theirs. The Bauhaus buildings are maintained in their original form – functional layouts, light, air, calm. The courtyards hold a playground, a treehouse, and a herbal garden. The café, the cinema, the bakery are not amenities provided for residents but spaces made by them, reflecting their languages, their cultures, their rituals. Even a simple “good morning,” as

residents say, requires care when it crosses twenty languages. That daily effort of recognition is, in the deepest sense, what the NEB means by beauty.

Inclusion, in Prosfygika, is structural. Housing is a commons: no one pays rent, no one is turned away on grounds of income, origin or status. Assemblies are open to all, translation is provided, roles are distributed by interest not expertise. The Women's Assembly holds full decision-making authority on issues affecting women and femininities. Two hundred people from twenty-seven countries govern themselves together, and have done so for sixteen years.

*From the NEB Prize application submitted by **ACAN Greece**, Architects Climate Action Network Greece*

The community runs a health clinic and social pharmacy, a bakery, a nursery school, a children's education structure, a canteen, a cinema and a community café. All these are structures open not only to residents but to neighbours, visitors, and the wider city. The community also runs a solidarity guest house, offering free accommodation and care for families of patients from the adjacent oncology hospital. Community-led governance, cooperative ownership, care for vulnerable groups, retrofitting with traditional materials, intergenerational and intercultural coexistence, and social infrastructure are embedded in the neighbourhood.

Prosfygika is the kind of place the resolution imagines when it speaks of "inclusive neighbourhoods with opportunities for all." What this community has built aligns, point for point, with NEB values and what the Parliament's resolution calls for.

On all but one point: **it is a squat.**

A squat that no one really cared about for the past 16 years, as most of it is public property that has remained unused due to lack of strategy and funding. Then came 2025 and ERDF – the European Regional Development Fund. In June 2025, and without prior notice to the residents, the Region of Attica delivered a plan to develop the vacant area to social housing and a hospitality project for families of patients of the nearby Oncology Hospital. **The response of the community was firm:** Prosfygika is a social housing project – while the guest house is already there, renovated from their own resources and on a basis of solidarity, not charity.

This is not an exceptional situation. Across Europe, the language of regeneration, renovation and social renewal frequently produces exactly this outcome: the erasure of existing social fabric in order to create, at considerable expense, a simulacrum of what was already there. The Parliament's resolution rightly warns against regeneration policies that "lead to the displacement of residents, including long-term residents." Prosfygika is precisely the test case for whether that warning means anything in practice.

This raises the question that the housing resolution, for all its ambition, does not quite ask: should policy keep designing solutions from the top down, or should it also build processes capable of recognising, protecting and scaling what communities have already built? For its previous and current mandates, the Commission has been [seeking meaningful participation and engagement in policymaking](#), recognising that complex

societal challenges are not solved in offices in Athens or Brussels, but rather by embracing citizen-led social innovation. After all, the rule of law itself in democratic societies should be a product of popular will, while social practices *can* and *should* be able to produce new institutions that can be incorporated into law.

Prosfygika was not designed by a housing agency, funded by a cohesion programme, or piloted by a think tank. It was never an H2020 Living Lab or part of a European Urban Initiative. It was built by people who needed somewhere to live and chose to do it together. Its sustainability was not certified – it grew from scarcity. Its inclusion was not mandated – it emerged from the daily work of coexistence across differences. Its beauty was not specified in a brief and approved by anonymous reviewers – it accumulated through sixteen years of collective care. The question for European housing policy is not whether this model is replicable. It is whether policy is structured to see it at all.

Nor is Prosfygika alone. The history of European cities is full of moments where communities occupied abandoned or neglected buildings and, over time, turned that act of necessity into recognised, lasting social infrastructure. According to [CoHab Athens](#), a research and advocacy group for cooperative housing, *the experience of autorecupero in Italy, the case of Casa Orsola in Barcelona, and the Instandbesetzungen in Berlin show that practices beginning from the occupation of buildings abandoned by their owners and the state can be transformed into institutionally recognised forms of social housing, with usage contracts, collective management and social access criteria.*

These are not marginal footnotes. They are precedents, proof that the distance between a community-led housing practice and a recognised, funded, legally secure social housing model is not a matter of principle but of political will and institutional imagination. Europe has done this before. The question is whether it is willing to do it again.

The project brought forward by regional authorities, funded with MFF resources, proposes to permanently evict the residents of Prosfygika in order to refurbish the buildings and reintroduce them, afterwards, as social housing for others. The current community would be displaced so that a newly invented community could be housed. The people who built, maintained and governed this place for sixteen years would be removed so that the buildings they cared for could be handed to someone else.

This is not an isolated planning dispute. It is a precise illustration of what happens when top-down institutional logic encounters a bottom-up social reality and cannot find the category to contain it. The residents of Prosfygika do not fit the standard profile of social housing beneficiaries – passive recipients of a service provided by the state – because they are something the standard profile does not account for: **the authors of their own housing solution.**

The Parliament's resolution warns explicitly against regeneration policies that displace long-standing residents. It calls for community-led models to be recognised and supported. It insists that EU funds serve communities, not displace them. Should EU structural funds be used to empty a self-governed, community-led, sixteen-year-old social housing project in the name of creating social housing?

Europe's housing crisis is real and urgent. But the solutions will not come only from construction targets, permitting reform and investment platforms. They will come from recognising and protecting what already works: **the communities, the commons, the collective arrangements that people have built because the market and the state left them no other option.**

Prosfygika is one of those arrangements. It is fragile, contested, and under pressure. It is also, as explained in our application for the NEB prize, one of the most complete examples of community-led social housing in Europe. The question is whether European housing policy is prepared to take lessons from it, or instead fund its demolition.

[SIGN THE PETITION FOR THE DEFENSE OF THE COMMUNITY OF SQUATTED PROSFYGIKA](#)