

CASE STUDY

REPORT

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PROJECT

Home Silk Road -
Housing toward
empowerment
📍 Lyon Métropole,
France

TOPIC

Housing

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Lyon Métropole - Home Silk Road

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About Home Silk Road

Home Silk Road is a Urban Innovative Actions-funded project to provide housing solutions for vulnerable groups in a dynamically changing neighbourhood of Villeurbanne, in the metropolitan area of Lyon. The project prepares the low-waste, long-term architectural transformation of a heritage building in a former silk industry complex, to accommodate various housing forms ranging from social housing to student accommodation, public services, cultural venues, social and solidarity initiatives, a restaurant as well as co-working spaces and incubators.

During the construction phase, the project also makes use of temporary uses of social and cultural activities to bring new communities to the site, test future uses for the building and its surroundings, as well as to engage residents in a participatory process to co-design future activities and narratives for the neighbourhood. Home Silk Road creates synergies between sectors that are often disconnected: by bringing temporary housing in a construction site and by inserting cultural and social activities in a housing project, it breaks down the traditional of urban regeneration and introduces new dynamics and new synergies in Villeurbanne's Carré de Soie neighbourhood.



Community event at L'Autre Soie. Photo (c) Eutropian

We tend to imagine emergency housing shelters as bleak and miserable. We think about them as fabricated in a hurry to meet deadlines, suitable to offer a roof for those in need but not capable of restoring their dignity. When we picture these shelters, we assume they are isolated places where the bad fortunes of the inhabitants can be

hidden from public view.

However, when visitors enter L’Autre Soie, this is not what they see. Walking into the park of an industrial heritage building in Villeurbanne, a municipality east of Lyon, one finds a city in the city. L’Autre Soie brings together families collecting their groceries, elderly residents resting in the shade, artists preparing for a meeting, youngsters heading to a concert, and construction workers raising a new floor on top of an existing structure.

Public housing projects, especially when catering for vulnerable populations, often try to minimise costs and maximise the useful area used for apartments. In this logic, there is hardly any room for communal spaces, especially for non-related activities. L’Autre Soie is different: here cultural events and the social and solidarity economy are natural ingredients of a housing complex. "For us, it's important to develop the city not just with buildings, but also with a unique cultural spirit," explains William Lafond, the coordinator of L’Autre Soie, "because we think culture is key for living together."

Description

A marriage between different sectors

L’Autre Soie, this experiment taking place in the former silk factory of Villeurbanne, was at the heart of the UIA-funded project Home Silk Road. L’Autre Soie was born from the marriage of two projects: while the GIE La Ville Autrement was looking for a site to build a new emergency shelter, the cultural and social innovation laboratory CCO, with a history of half a century in Villeurbanne, was seeking for a new location and a bigger concert hall. This unlikely association between a housing provider and a cultural centre was brought into being by the Municipality of Villeurbanne which was exploring the regeneration of the Carré de Soie area, with support from the Lyon Metropolitan Authority.

Culture and the activities brought to L’Autre Soie by the social economy initiatives hosted in the frame of the "temporary occupation" of the heritage site are by no means ornaments in an otherwise mainstream development project. "Structures like the CCO or the social inclusion association Alynea are not used here as cultural or social washing at the end of the project," underlines CCO director Harout Mekhsian. On the contrary, they act as links to connect a diversity of people and organisations. "Culture, for us, constitutes the fourth pillar of sustainability, with the economy, ecology and social services," concludes Mekhsian.

More precisely, culture here was used to build heterogeneity in the midst of a housing project, turning the coexistence of residents and people from the neighbourhood into lively connections. CCO’s cultural activities and the organisation’s involvement in citizen participation and various forms of emancipatory actions serve to build a collective imaginary, a shared narrative about the neighbourhood.

At the same table: co-governing L’Autre Soie

Home Silk Road is a complex cooperation between partners from different sectors, with different professional languages and working cultures. Besides the complementary multi-level relationship between the Lyon Metropole and the Villeurbanne Municipality that facilitates the project, it was also important to find means to connect all non-public actors as well. To facilitate dialogue and cooperation among them, a transparent governance structure was created in the form of a Société par Actions Simplifiée, an umbrella organisation to bring together all partners except for the public administrations. The Société par Actions Simplifiée or SAS format is widely used in civil society and social and solidarity economy due to its legal qualities that promote cooperation.

For many partners, regularly meeting to make joint decisions played an important role in creating a horizontal mode of co-governance. "The fact that CCO is at the same table with much larger players allowed us to set more precise, concrete and attainable objectives," recognises Mekhsian. The SAS is also a helpful tool for the public administrations to work with: "It gives partners the space and time to get to know each other and work better together," underlines Mathieu Fortin, responsible for economic management at the Villeurbanne Municipality.

However, the SAS does not eliminate the individual interests of partner organisations: they keep on maintaining their dialogues with the Municipality and the Metropolitan Authority. The idea was not to create a single dialogue between public administrations and cultural and social actors through a single channel of interaction but to explore how to "keep this wealth of dialogues with the public sector, this diversity of issues and actions by means of coordination within the project," explains Mekhsian.

"It is important to involve people who do not necessarily have the habit of participating in the life of the area. To allow a heterogeneity of inhabitants to participate and shape the narrative of this neighbourhood." Harout Mekhsian

Participation through confidence and competences

Besides the horizontal co-governance of the official project consortium, Home Silk Road also relies on a great diversity of partners and contributors. A real diversity of ideas and contributions are brought into the project through a variety of partners and activities. The events of CCO, a cultural organisation active in Villeurbanne for decades, opened the L'Autre Soie complex for the broader neighbourhood and even to the metropolitan region. The temporary occupation of the building by a variety of cultural, social and emergency initiatives, coordinated by CCO in collaboration with GIE La Ville Autrement, did not only allow L'Autre Soie to experiment with different future uses of the premises, but also helped integrate the site into the existing cultural and social dynamics of the area. All these activities brought over 18,000 people to L'Autre Soie between 2018-2020.

Inviting the broader community to use its services is not the only means with which L'Autre Soie engaged with Villeurbanne and the Lyon Métropole. Originally conceived as a "meeting place and a space of freedom" to help encounters between different social groups and support citizen initiatives, Mekhsian recalls that the CCO has been actively involved "in the citizen life of the neighbourhood by developing a capacity for participation with entities as the neighbourhood council and the citizens' council." Building on these capacities and connections, an "Atelier permanent" was established, offering a formal participation platform inviting residents to co-design the future of the site and the neighbourhood and to shape the narratives of the area.



Public event at L'Autre Soie. Photo (c) Eutropian

The Atelier permanent and the other activities involving the broader community of L'Autre Soie are not finished with the end of the UIA project. On the contrary: many of the issues will remain open after the construction works as well. The Atelier permanent is working on consolidating its achievements: one of its objectives is to create confidence in the broader community to participate in the definition of uses and the future co-management of the park surrounding the industrial heritage building at the core of L'Autre Soie. Established and adjusted participation channels and more capacity on the side of citizens will help generate meaningful participation also in the next phases of the project.

The power of place: a heritage site and the dignity of everyday life

At the heart of Home Silk Road lies L'Autre Soie, a heritage building, erected in 1926 to serve as the girls' residence for the silk factory. The architectural project for the site respects this history. After its transformation, the building combines a student residence with various social services and incubators. Until then, a series of temporary uses helps position the site in the area's cultural and social life. These temporary uses "invited people to enter the site, giving visibility to the project and the issues addressed here," recalls Lafond. They also created continuity between different phases of the project.

While the building's "historical layer is a leverage for the integration of people who are usually put in soulless city areas," as Lafond suggests, it is located in a broader territory with many layers of heritage. Besides the industrial past, the Carré de Soie area is also at the junction of three municipalities and four priority intervention neighbourhoods, with different histories of immigration, changing land use and gentrification.

Focusing on the L'Autre Soie building as a new anchor point, the goal of Home Silk Road is also the place-based regeneration of the broader neighbourhood. One of the key questions asked by the project is, as Harout Mekhsian recalls: "How can we, in these areas that were for a long time considered marginal, create a centrality, a

place where people can find resources?”



Entrance of L'Autre Soie. Photo (c) Eutopian

Nature of integration

Home Silk Road is part of the larger transformation of the Carré de Soie area and its cultural and social activities. The project's strong participation mechanisms and governance structures have ensured that it will go beyond individuals and organisational structures. Instead of waiting for a projected end result, temporary occupations or uses have tested uses and helped the broader community get acquainted with the site, thus creating continuity between different phases of the project.

The Urban Innovative Actions project proved to be a catalyst for this cooperation. While the GIE La Ville Autrement had already been experimenting with bringing culture into public housing projects, it has never been done at such a scale. The UIA call in 2016 brought partners together around a common goal, to build a project that could be compatible with both the aspirations to build new housing for vulnerable groups and to empower residents with the help of culture.

While the partnership's first proposal was not granted UIA funding, partners remained together for a successful second bid, building on an existing network of partners and the hard-won confidence among them. The long perspective of three years offered by UIA also enabled the partnership to co-design processes and capitalise on the results.

Takeaways

- Temporary uses: instead of waiting until the costly and lengthy construction works are concluded, it is important to introduce temporary uses on sites undergoing transformation in order to test future uses and help people get acquainted with the site
- Innovate across sectors: By integrating housing in construction sites and bringing culture into emergency housing schemes, different policy fields combine with each other to create new synergies
- Working in new organisational interfaces for cooperation: New structures, umbrella organisations, or governance mechanisms act as organisational interfaces between the municipality, civil society, and private partners, allowing for more horizontal (multi-sectoral) cooperation and co-governance (multi-level) processes during implementation.

Further reading and selected key resources

- [Project site](#)

See on UIA website

