

# Rehabilitation of deprived inner city areas

## European perspectives

### Brasov // Bristol // Halle // Porto

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#### ▪ Introduction

In France, a new program concerning the rehabilitation of deprived inner city areas was launched in 2009. Indeed, in spite of decades of urban policies aimed at eradicating deprived housing, there are still nowadays districts where the situation remained unimproved. With this program, the idea is to develop an integrated urban development, steered at a national level (through the incentives of two agencies, Anah and ANRU and the ministry in charge of housing) and applied at a local level (at the municipality or metropolitan level). The implementation of this program is still in process and the idea arose that it would be interesting to go to other European cities and see how the rehabilitation of deprived inner city areas is done abroad. The aim was to come back with some good practices and ways of dealing with deprived inner city areas.

To realize this report, a methodology was set up beforehand. For each site, a review of the main documents and articles related to our issues was made before going abroad. In addition to this theoretical approach, visits on sites and meetings with the important stakeholders were conducted in each city. It is important to notice that there are some limitations of this study, first of all because of the short period of time it covered. Indeed, in four months, it was impossible to build monographs of all the cities. Therefore, this study gives us perspectives on each city, through a prism that is altered by my point of view and the stakeholder's discourses too.

Since it is not aimed to be a monograph of each city, it was compulsory to establish a reading grid. This grid was a result from the interviews I made in France. The idea was to start from the issues faced in France and build general questions from them.

Four main themes were then selected:

- the relationship between the housing market and the strategies implemented (in situation of tensed housing market or not),
- the different strategies of the public sector,
- the attitude regarding the resilience of urban forms in these particular districts,
- ways of dealing with the current inhabitants of the area, linked to the goal of urban diversity.

The sites were also selected thanks to specific criteria that are mainly the availability of data, the presence of a recent rehabilitation project in the inner city area and the size of the city. At the end, four cities were selected: Brasov in Romania, Bristol in England, Halle in Germany and Porto in Portugal.

#### ▪ Housing market and urban rehabilitation in inner city areas

Even if these cities are really different and have specific contexts, they all have to deal with the fluctuations of the housing market. The extreme situation can be found in Halle. Indeed, this city is declining as a whole and it can be called a "shrinking city". This means that not only the number of inhabitants is decreasing, but also the ageing process is fast and job opportunities are lower. The impact on the housing market is very important since the level of vacancy is high and the attractiveness of the whole area is low. The inner city area suffers from this and the solution found in Halle was to take part in two programs ran at a national level ("Stadtumbau Ost"<sup>1</sup>) and at a regional level (the IBA<sup>2</sup> of Saxony-Anhalt). The main strategies are to demolish quite a lot of buildings (more than 10 000 dwellings were demolished), to

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<sup>1</sup> Urban rehabilitation program in the Eastern part of Germany

<sup>2</sup> International exhibition of architecture

focus on specific areas by improving their image (by organizing events for example or by implementing a new equipment) and by raising the awareness of the stakeholders regarding the shrinking problem. The results are not always satisfactory but the main success is that, now, in Halle, almost everybody is convinced or at least aware that the city is not anymore in a growing process.

In Bristol, which is almost the opposite of Halle regarding the state of the housing market, the issues are different and the concern is to put a frame to the private investments in order to finance equipments or social housing (which would not maybe be taken care of by developers).

- A wide range of public sector strategies

The implication of the public sector in the process of rehabilitation of inner city areas is very different in each city. The relationship with the private sector is the main variable. In Porto, the rehabilitation is lead by a public organism called Porto Vivo SRU. The idea is to focus, at the beginning, on strategic areas and to improve the situation there, hoping it will spread the dynamic in the whole area. But Porto Vivo SRU does not work alone and rely a lot on private stakeholders. The partnership is based on the fact that Porto Vivo SRU can help them to rehabilitate their dwelling by having specific agreements with all sectors involved in the process (for example, banks or the construction sector) and by having a good knowledge of the dynamics of the area. The public organism is important because it gives a general strategy and view for the area, and then, the private stakeholders can develop their project, being more aware of what the demand is. For example, in some cases, the owners of several buildings joined and they managed to develop bigger flats with also the possibility of adding parking lots to their buildings, which is a good strategy to attract families in the area.

In Brasov, the public sector relies also on private actors but Europe is important as well. Indeed, it can provide not only funding but also a participation to a network of European cities, which allows Brasov to exchange good practices and ways of doing the rehabilitation.

In Bristol, the main idea is to cope with the influence of the private sector, especially regarding the social part of the project. Therefore, the public authority is setting up tools to orientate the projects, like for example the compulsory percentage of affordable housing in each new construction of group of housing.

- Resilience of urban forms and the role of heritage

In historic areas, the pattern of urban fabric is often not considered to be suitable for the modern ways of living in a city. Therefore, the solution is sometimes to destroy buildings and to replace them by new ones, fitted with bigger apartments. The example of Porto is interesting regarding this issue of finding a balance between answering the demand and maintaining a certain atmosphere in an old district. Indeed, the question of heritage is striking in a lot of deprived inner city areas. In Porto, it has become even more important since the classification as a world heritage site by Unesco in 1996. The impact was positive because it shed some lights on a very deprived area of the city, but on the other hand, it made the rehabilitation process more difficult since the façades and the structure of the area have to be kept exactly the way they are. Nevertheless, solutions were found, (like the association of owners mentioned above). The resilience of forms is therefore possible in an area where, at a first glance, everything was supposed to stay untouched.

The concept of heritage is a collective construction. It can come for the "top", like in Porto, but it can also start from the "bottom", as it is the case in Brasov. Over there, individuals and specialized architects decided to tackle the issue of ruined heritage step by step. They started with an old and emblematic door and they raised awareness of others (bigger associations). They have now rehabilitated several doors and their work has been promoted in the city (by the media essentially).

- Low income population and urban diversity

Urban diversity is a main target of urban policies nowadays. Indeed, a diverse urban environment is considered to be more sustainable and vibrant. This concept encompasses urban function mix (housing, retail, services..) but also social and generational diversity. Nevertheless, in almost every city I visited, the means to prevent gentrification from spreading seemed a little bit weak. Most of the time (like in Bristol for example), social housing is implemented and sometimes, gentrification is almost welcomed, considering the high degree of deprivation of the area.

In Porto, the idea is less to put an emphasis on social diversity and more about setting up an integrated urban development strategy. The objective is to attract the private sector, in an area which suffers from a very low image (due to the high crime rate, the degradation of the buildings and the poverty of the population essentially). The strategy is to work on the housing problems but also on the kind of equipments they want to implement in the district. The idea behind it is that specific equipment, like a cultural center settled in an old market hall or a student residence, will attract a targeted population and then participate in the diversity of uses of the area.

Developing urban diversity can also mean adding more houses in the city center as it is the case in Bristol. The functional mix is there a goal.

In Brasov, the question is more to manage to keep the housing function in an old attractive area where retail and banks are spreading.

- Conclusions

The contexts of the cities we got interested in are all very different and it is necessary to realize that the main objective was not to build comparisons with France or to consider the practices on a hierarchical basis. Thanks to this study, we managed to gather ways of dealing with the rehabilitation of deprived inner city areas. What can we then keep in mind?

First of all, it is important to notice that the reflection should be made at a local but also metropolitan level. Indeed, the strategy implemented in the inner city area is very different in a context where the city as a whole is competitive compared to a city which is declining.

The second conclusion drawn is that the "new public management", based on specific agencies is efficient in terms of mobilization of people, knowledge and money for a particular project but it should not be considered as a perfect way of doing things. These agencies also have to deal with urban dynamics and the fluctuations of the housing market, which are often stronger.

Thirdly, there is a wide range of relationships between the private and the public sectors in the four cities considered. We tried to synthesize them in three main categories: *substitution*, where the private sector supports most of the rehabilitation work and the public sector put frames to it; *mobilization*, in which the public authority fosters the private stakeholders to realize the work and steers the global strategy; *decoupling*, in which the public authority steps in because it would be almost impossible to attract private investments in the area.

Lastly, it seems important to keep in mind that equipments and public spaces are as important as housing in the rehabilitation process, in the objective to change the image of a deprived area. The concept of urban marketing is then used.

The rehabilitation of deprived inner city areas is a complex process, embedded in the whole city's context. Studying it at a European level can provide an interesting opening.