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The New Urban Process: Toward Habitability of Historic Centers



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The New Urban Process is the strategic framework of the Organization of World Heritage Cities (OWHC). It serves as a guide for member cities to enhance the habitability of their historic centers so that they remain inhabited and vibrant.

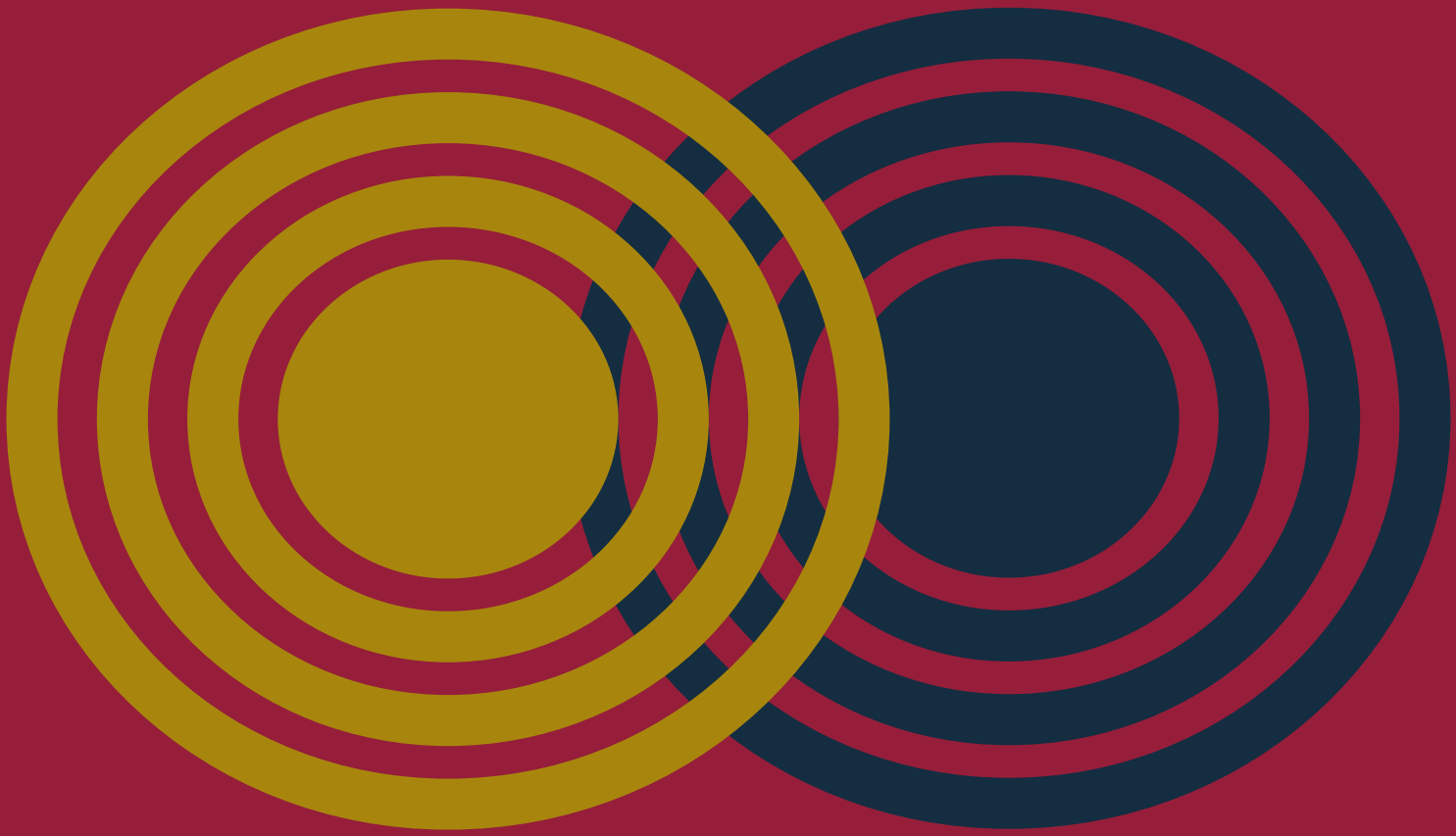


The adoption of the **New Urban Process** at the **Congress in Marrakech (2026)** marks the culmination of a process initiated at the **Congress in Québec City (2022)** and endorsed at the **Congress in Córdoba (2024)**. Its conceptual foundations introduce a paradigm shift that facilitates the transition from a conservation-centered approach to managing sites inscribed on the World Heritage List to urban planning for historic centers.

Urban planning, economic development, social cohesion, and the environment are considered together, placing residents at the center of discussions about the city of tomorrow and giving heritage a decisive role in ensuring the coherence of actions.

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1. Conceptual Foundations



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“**Habitability**” and “**historic centers**” are the two conceptual foundations that position the **OWHC** as a key player in World Heritage management within a dynamic international context.



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1.1 Habitability: The Heart of Public Action

Habitability reflects, through a systemic approach, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) while taking into account the diversity of situations faced by the cities of the **OWHC**.

It encompasses the conditions that enable World Heritage cities to remain inhabited, to be preserved through use, and to be passed on through controlled transformation that reconciles the continuity of heritage, evolving lifestyles, and the demands of modernity:

- physical conditions—whether inherited, revitalized, or new—adapted to contemporary life and climate changes.
- economic, social, and cultural conditions that foster individual and collective prosperity.
- symbolic and relational conditions that foster a sense of belonging, collective pride, and the ability to form close-knit communities.
- conditions of hospitality that attract visitors, facilitate the integration of new populations, and foster the establishment of innovative activities that drive societal change.
- operational conditions that strengthen public action and enable the necessary transformations to be undertaken.

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Habitability is unique to each city, which must chart its own path by drawing on its distinctiveness: its history, culture, climate, and the choices of the past that have shaped its heritage—choices that, over time, have shaped the character of its territory.

By placing the quality of life and well-being of the population at the heart of public action, habitability necessarily changes the way strategies, projects, and investments are conceived. It thus reorients the purpose of policies by providing a comprehensive understanding of the heritage city and its challenges.

From this perspective, heritage is an irreplaceable resource. Its preservation cannot be separated from the living conditions of the people who inhabit these cities and who have the privilege of using it to shape their collective well-being. Cities have a responsibility to pass this heritage on to future generations so that they, in turn, can interpret it in light of the needs of their own time.

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1.2 Historic Centers: Laboratories of Urban Innovation

The historic centers of World Heritage cities—that is, the inscribed properties, their buffer zones, and, in some cases, broader areas—are complex and cohesive urban heritage areas at the heart of the tensions between current uses and future aspirations.

They offer an ideal scale for action to improve habitability and make them the sites of contemporary urban transitions. Their ability to adapt and evolve in step with social, economic, and environmental transformations forms the foundation of their vitality and of the international recognition of the humanistic values they embody.

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Throughout history, these centers have been spaces of convergence, cultural blending, and exchange that fuel their dynamism. Their density, functional diversity, compact form, the variety of uses they foster, their human scale, as well as the strength of long-standing communities and local expertise constitute exceptional urban, social, and cultural capital and a system of values to be harnessed in the service of habitability:

- **urban life**, a source of community, well-being, and locally rooted lifestyles.
- the **quality and beauty of the built environment** and public spaces as a factor in competitiveness and economic vitality.
- **social**, generational, and functional diversity, characterized by inclusivity and solidarity.
- the **pride and sense of belonging** of a population committed to the future of its living environment.
- a **preference** for the rehabilitation of existing structures over their replacement.
- **respect for the authenticity of heritage** in architecture and urban planning.
- **moderation and frugality** in the use of resources to support the ecological transition.
- the **dynamic coexistence** of all functions within historic centers.
- the **celebration of the narratives**, histories, and wisdom of these urban areas.

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2. Operational Perspectives: “Local Processes for Habitability”



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The **New Urban Process** helps **OWHC** member cities—regardless of t heir geographic location, history, or resources—to implement “local habitability processes” in their historic centers. These processes consider the scope and diversity of the issues at stake, as well as the urgency of taking action to address these challenges and create the conditions for their success.



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2.1 Issues at stake for Historic Centers

OWHC member cities share issues that reflect the potential for conflict between "**heritage**" and "**uses**," between "**memory**" and "**modernity**," and between "**attractiveness**" and "**well-being**." While they do not all face the same degree of difficulty, they all confront phenomena that reinforce one another rather than isolated challenges.

- **Urbanization** and **changing lifestyles** are placing pressure on the historic city, which was designed for different rhythms and different uses.
- **Infrastructure dedicated to automobiles** is transforming the historic center, turning it from a place to live into a backdrop, and dismantling a living space in favour of a transit area.
- **Dependence on tourism** threatens what it is supposed to promote, and economic marginalization diminishes the social function of the historic city.
- **Heritage ceases to be a living entity**; its value to society is relegated to the margins of urban projects, which weakens communities and social cohesion, fragments identities, and disperses foundational narratives, at the risk of extinguishing them.
- **Residents are increasingly excluded from decision-making**, local stakeholders struggle to coordinate, institutions lose legitimacy, and projects become scattered.
- **Urban ambition is eroded** by institutional compartmentalization, mistrust of governing bodies, and a lack of funding exacerbated by economic models ill-suited to habitability projects.

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The New Urban Process prioritizes four Strategic Axes to address these challenges.

Requalifying the habitat
to affirm the primacy of the residential function.

Refreshing the city
—both literally and figuratively —to facilitate the climate transition.

Transforming mobility
to establish accessibility as a common good rather than a costly privilege.

Regenerating the urbanity
to provide an attractive and reassuring setting, both for residents and for those who visit the city or seek to innovate and create.

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2.2 "Challenges to Be Addressed" to Achieve Habitability

The member cities of the **OWHC** face challenges that define the intellectual framework within which the **New Urban Process** is situated. These challenges are not viewed as distinct areas of intervention, but rather as interdependent levers linking heritage, urban development, and well-being:

- **the primacy of residential** use in historic centers, reinforced by the rehabilitation of vacant buildings, the regulation of tourist accommodations, and a diverse, high-quality, and affordable housing supply for all socioeconomic groups, combined with proximity to services and shops.

- **the quality of public spaces** as a structuring element of community life and a factor in competitiveness and economic vitality, reconciling active mobility, economic vitality, and a diversity of uses among residents, visitors, and events.

- **improving the climate comfort** of the entire population by reinterpreting traditions and better integrating nature into historic centers to improve public health, reduce pollution, nuisances, and heat islands.

- **active mobility** that combines different modes of travel to free up public spaces, anticipate and mitigate the effects of climate change, and promote calm, accessible movement that is compatible with the heritage value of these sites.

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- **energy efficiency** in historic buildings and contemporary interventions, treating the historic center as a distinct yet coherent area that is interconnected with the rest of the city.
- **adaptation to environmental**, social, or economic upheavals by drawing on historical continuity, intangible values, and the built heritage's capacity to adjust and contribute to the ecological transition.
- **the authenticity of heritage**, a factor in community identity and the vitality of urban areas, as well as their capacity to reinvent themselves and convey the urban character and values unique to each World Heritage city.
- **the restoration of historic buildings**, while ensuring that architectural innovations meet standards of beauty and quality with traditional craftsmanship and the distinctive features of the built heritage.
- **balanced tourism**, a driver of a local economy that benefits the population, helps strengthen local communities, and supports the attractiveness and vitality of cities.
- **community participation**, with informed, responsible, and engaged residents within active communities and evolving lifestyles, supporting public authorities in preserving and passing on their heritage identity.

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2.3 "Conditions for Success" of Local Processes

To address these challenges, "local processes" also focus on the conditions essential to the success of habitability projects.

A. Evolving Governance

Governance must adapt in order to remove political, administrative, and professional barriers. The resulting paradigm shift enables a transition from a conservation-focused approach to one of urban transformation that is no longer strictly sector-based or exclusively focused on heritage.

Governance that promotes habitability is based on three key principles:

I. Political Commitment to Habitability

The habitability of historic centers depends above all on a shift in political approach, improved practices, and the ability to adapt to profound and rapid urban changes. This commitment is based on a vision for the future of the historic center that provides public action with a shared, long-term direction. Focused on habitability, this vision places people at the heart of urban concerns and treats heritage as a resource.

II. Strengthened Institutional Capacities

Issues related to habitability transcend traditional administrative boundaries and require greater coordination among municipal departments, between different levels of decision-making and action, and among all stakeholders. Institutional organization and procedures make it possible to move beyond sectoral approaches and to integrate new stakeholders into decision-making and management processes in order to enhance the effectiveness of public action.

III. Community of Interests Fostering a Culture of Innovation

Habitability requires the mobilization of all actors involved in urban transformation: decision-makers, managers, residents, experts, economic stakeholders, and institutional partners. Together, they help define a shared vision and implement actions. This community, united by shared interests, brings a culture of innovation and experimentation to governance and institutions, contributing to the new paradigm of habitability.

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B. Implementing Overall Strategies

An overall strategy is necessary to translate habitability into concrete commitments. It serves as a reference point for all stakeholders, united by a common purpose; it guides trade-offs and informs decisions beyond institutional mandates. It takes into account the interdependence of needs and the potential for synergies related to housing, mobility, the ecological transition, and economic and social development.

An overall strategy that promotes habitability is based on three key principles:

I. Shared Understanding

Habitability becomes a collective ambition when stakeholders share a common understanding of the challenges, aspirations, and future of their historic centers. This shared understanding transcends sectoral interests and translates the political vision into a coherent approach to the long-term transformation of the historic center.

II. Flexible and Adaptive Planning and Management Approaches

Comprehensive strategies establish a common direction that ensures coherence and alignment among the various existing plans and public policies, without undermining the authority of the responsible departments. They promote a management approach that adapts to changing urban needs and challenges while balancing immediate actions with long-term perspectives.

III. Operational Objectives

Specific operational objectives ensure concrete results. They provide a framework for cross-cutting, coordinated action that complements the main drivers of urban transformation to jointly and simultaneously achieve the key priorities for habitability *(Upgrading Housing, Revitalizing the City, Transforming Mobility, Regenerating Urban Areas).*

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C. Creating a Common Framework for Investment in Heritage

Financing habitability in historic centers requires more than just financial instruments; it requires a common framework. This common framework is not an abstract concept, but a concrete and operational reality, a platform, understood as a sustainable and structured environment within which public authorities, nonprofit organizations, local associations, and private investors can communicate, build trust, and act in concert.

A common framework for investment in heritage is based on three key principles:

I. Public Authorities as Facilitators

Public agencies cannot shoulder the financial burden of heritage revitalization alone. Nor should they seek to do so. Their role should be to create conditions conducive to non-public investment. This involves absorbing the risks associated with the early phases of projects and creating a foundation upon which private investment can build.

II. Structured Representation of Civil Society

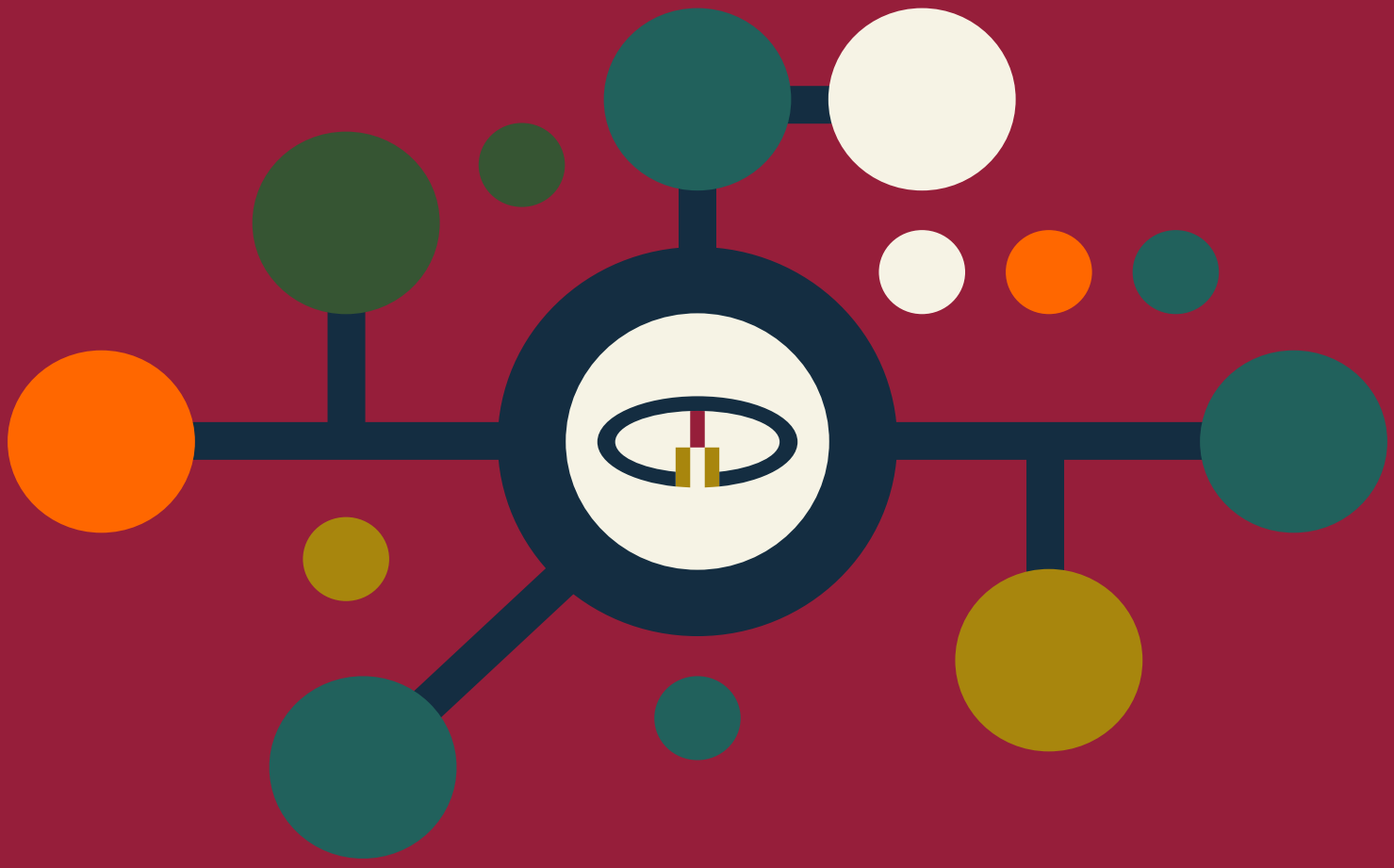
An effective management framework incorporates the participation of civil society, which brings local expertise and legitimacy that strengthen the credibility of projects in the eyes of both investors and donors. It bridges the various perspectives and interests at play, while also facilitating the harmonization of terminology regarding investment terms, return expectations, and compliance with standards applicable to heritage properties.

III. Structuring Projects

Structuring projects are the concrete embodiment of the ambitions set forth in habitability strategies. They pave the way for a new generation of heritage projects. By addressing specific spaces, sectors, or strategic issues, they contribute to the sustainable transformation of historic centers and improve habitability. Beyond their immediate results, they generate leverage effects that enhance the coherence of public interventions and foster a larger-scale transformation of the region.

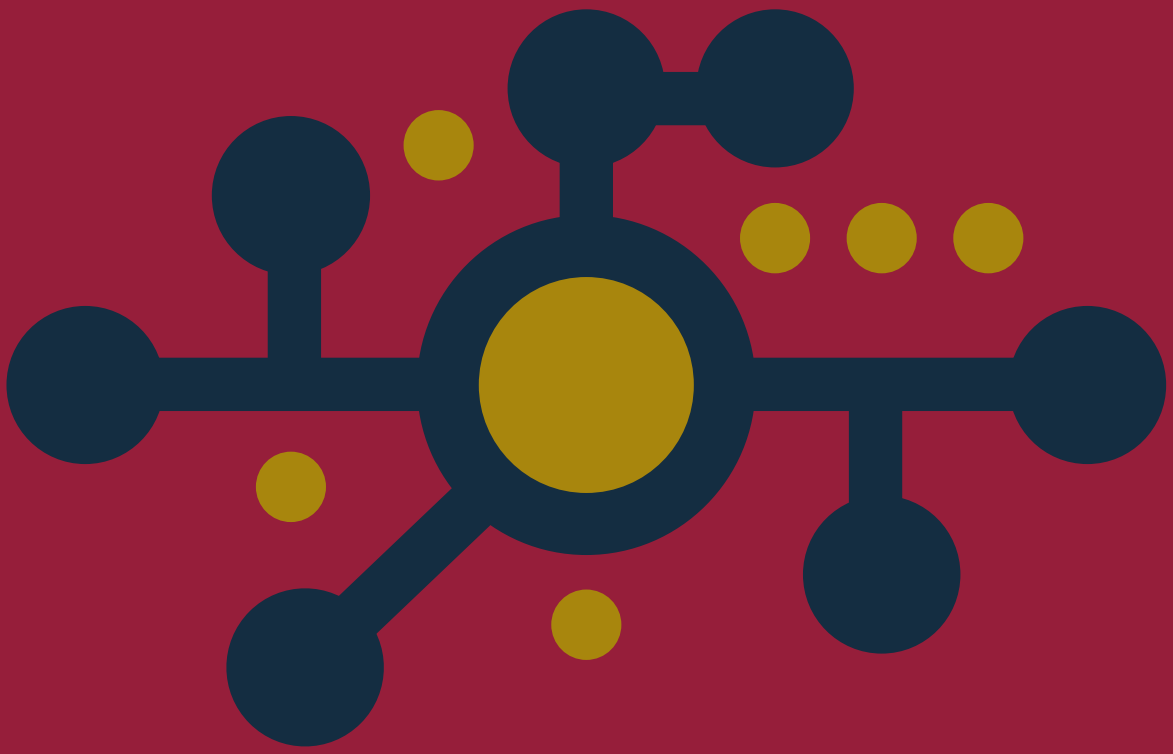
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3. Role of the OWHC



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The **OWHC**'s primary role is to support the network's member cities in implementing their "local habitability processes." The Organization provides local stakeholders—including policymakers, site managers, technical services, and other partners in urban transformation—with methods, tools, and lessons learned.



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The **OWHC** provides a space for exchange, learning, and growth that enables each member city to pursue its own path toward habitability. Whether member cities are embarking on a systematic, long-term process, addressing specific issues, working on particular projects, or seeking continuous learning, they can rely on the **OWHC**'s enhanced support services, which strengthen collaboration within the **OWHC** and with its international partners.

The **OWHC** Action Plan builds on past experiences to better support cities, with a particular focus on "local processes," notably by offering

- regional meetings and biennial world congresses.
- collaborative projects on general themes or specific issues.
- technical and professional cooperation.
- learning activities to build skills.
- awareness-raising and educational initiatives.
- tools and approaches for documenting and sharing experiences.
- initiatives to highlight successful transformations and proposed models.

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Finally, the “Habitability Observatory,” developed as a tool for collective intelligence, will complement the framework established by the OWHC to support “local processes.” It captures and systematizes the stages of the collective reflection process that led to the development of the **New Urban Process**. It reinforces the approach established through the collaborative engineering framework developed by the OWHC since 2022 to leverage cities’ expertise. In practice, the Observatory will serve as a record of cities’ actions, a tool for learning and knowledge-building, a laboratory and accelerator for habitability projects, an early-warning system for emerging risks and challenges, and a tool for the continuous evolution of the **New Urban Process** and habitability projects in heritage cities.

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