

The Ukamau Model: From the Struggle for Housing to the Regeneration of the City

Submitted By: Fundación Feman

Organization Profile

Organization Name: Movimiento de Pobladores Ukamau

Organization Type: Civil society

Website: <https://ukamau.cl/>



Practice Details

Country(ies): Chile

City(ies): Santiago

Start Year: 2011

Ongoing: Yes

End Year: N/A

Main Adequate Housing Components:



Housing Thematic Areas:



Relevant SDGs:



Problem & Context

The project addresses the dual crisis of housing affordability and severe urban segregation in Santiago, Chile. Existing housing policies systematically displaced low-income families—especially those headed by women—to poorly served peripheries, disconnecting them from jobs, education, and services, and perpetuating inequality.

The main policy gap was a top-down approach that treated families as passive recipients of standardized, low-quality solutions, without mechanisms for real community participation in the design and planning of their habitat on well-located land.

Solution Developed

The “Ukamau Model” is a replicable methodology for the social production of habitat. Its goal is to empower organized low-income communities to become protagonists in the development of their own environment, thereby combating housing exclusion. In this case, the model was applied to secure high-quality housing in a central location for more than 600 families.

Key innovations of the model include:

- A radical participatory co-design process, where the community made direct decisions about architectural and urban design.
- A collaborative governance framework that effectively connects the community, the State, and technical teams.
- A feminist perspective in design, creating safe spaces and promoting care and social cohesion.
- The result is a superior housing standard (62 m²) that demonstrates the model's effectiveness.

Implementation

Implementation was carried out in phases over more than a decade, combining social action, technical management, and political negotiation.

Actors and Roles:

- Ukamau Settlers Movement (Community): Main actor. Led mobilization, political negotiation, and decision-making in the co-design process.
- Government (MINVU/SERVIU): Provided the legal framework and main funding through the DS49 subsidy, and facilitated land access by modifying the regulatory plan.
- Technical Team (FEMAN Foundation and Architects): Acted as strategic partner, translating the community's aspirations into a viable technical project and managing its execution.
- Private Sector (Construction Company): Carried out the construction work.

Brief Timeline:

- 2011–2017: Organization phase, land struggle, political negotiation, and securing regulatory and financial viability for Phase I (Maestranza I).
- 2017–2020: Co-design and construction of the 424 Maestranza I homes.
- 2018–2025: Replication of the model with Phase II (Maestranza II), including 200 new homes, demonstrating scalability.

Resources and Partnerships: Funding was primarily based on public subsidies from the Chilean State (DS49 Program). The key to success was a strong multi-actor alliance that overcame bureaucratic and technical barriers.

Enablers & Obstacles

Drivers: The main driver was the sustained commitment of the Ukamau community, whose decade-long mobilization was key. This was combined with the political will of MINVU actors to support a participatory model and a strategic alliance with a technical team (architects and FEMAN Foundation) that translated social demands into a high-quality project.

Obstacles: The main challenge was access to centrally located land, overcome through intense political negotiation and social pressure. The State's bureaucratic rigidity was addressed by demonstrating impeccable community organization that built trust. Finally, the limitations of the public subsidy were overcome with optimized design and efficient resource management, allowing for improvements without exceeding the budget.

Results & Impact

Quantitative Results:

- 624 high-quality homes built in two phases (424 in Maestranza I, 200 in Maestranza II), benefiting more than 2,500 people.
- 62 m² apartments, a significantly higher standard than traditional social housing in Chile.
- Winner of the 2021 Urban Contribution Award, the country's most prestigious recognition in the "Best Social Integration Project" category.

Qualitative Results and Impact:

The model has had a profound impact on its residents. The co-design process strengthened social capital, creating a resilient and highly organized community with a strong neighborhood identity. There has been a significant increase in the perception of safety, especially for women and children, thanks to pedestrian-centered design and natural community surveillance.

Long-Term Impact:

In the long run, the project combats urban segregation by anchoring low-income families in a central area with access to opportunities. It has also influenced public and academic debate on the right to the city, setting a public policy precedent and demonstrating that a social production of habitat model is a viable and successful alternative.

Replication & Scale Up

The practice was replicated on the same site (Estación Central, Santiago) with the “Maestranza II” project (200 homes), currently in its final phase.

Key factors that enabled replication were:

- The strong community organization and accumulated experience of the Ukamau Movement.
- The success of the first phase, which served as a validated test case.
- The already established strategic alliances between the community, the technical team, and state institutions, which streamlined the process.

The model can be scaled through:

- Systematizing its co-design and governance methodology into a replicable manual for other communities.
- Integrating it into national housing policy as a formal pathway for the social production of habitat, with dedicated funding.
- Training new community leaders and technical teams in this approach.
- Promoting public land bank policies to secure well-located land for similar projects.

Policy Uptake

This housing practice has informed or been partially integrated into policy discussions, strategies, or pilot-level policy instruments.

The Ukamau Model has served as a de facto pilot case, influencing academic and political debate on the right to the city in Chile. By pushing the boundaries of the DS49 program, it demonstrated that it is possible to achieve higher standards of quality and participation within existing frameworks. Its success, validated by the Urban Contribution Award, has positioned it as a precedent in discussions on the need to formally integrate the social production of habitat into national housing policy.

Lessons & Takeaways

In retrospect, we would seek to formalize participation channels with the State to reduce long negotiation times, which depended on political will and mobilization. We would implement a



more structured technical and financial knowledge transfer program for community leaders, further strengthening their management and negotiation capacity throughout the process. This would speed up the model's replicability.

Note

The original submission was received in Spanish. An automated translation was prepared using Copilot to enable broader multilingual access.