

DIVERSITY IN SEMI-PUBLIC SPACE IN HOUSING

A study for the City of Vienna,
Department of Housing Research (Dept. 50)
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Aims

An increasingly diverse population poses new challenges to cities in their search for socially sustainable growth. Integration of various groups and sub-groups and diversity are complex processes that take place at different levels in different places: in the workplace, at school, in the marketplace, in housing areas and in public space. Diversity itself has expanded to include non-ethnic categories of citizens and their respective lifestyles, and the new constellations and challenges they pose. Our efforts in this study have concentrated on better understanding the last two of these areas, namely housing and semi-public space related to housing, and their interdependence, by analysing the question holistically, looking at best practices in various cities the world over, and coming up with prescriptive solutions as a contribution to the debate, aimed at building better housing and better cities.

“Facts minus Myths” = a realistic basis for action

Austria has been attractive for migrants for a long time, both during the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and in the post-WWII period. The larger cities, especially Vienna, are the focus of immigration. About a third of Vienna's population of officially almost 1.7 million persons has a migrant background, and even a cursory glance at the surnames in Vienna's telephone directory indicates that people with some kind of migrant background make up the majority. Almost a quarter lives in council housing (in about 220,000 residential units) and a further 18.6% limited by an income ceiling lives in subsidized and rent-controlled apartments erected by for-profit or non-profit housing associations. About a third of businesses are run by people with a migrant background from almost 90 different countries, while over half of all businesses are run by migrants or their descendants. Contrary to popular belief, only 2% of these are of Turkish origin (ref. Statistik Austria, WWFF).

National origins are of decreasing importance. It is important to re-evaluate the outdated conception that we are basically dealing with two large mono-ethnic groups from Turkey and the former Yugoslavian republics, which constituted the largest migrant groups in third quarter of the 20th Century, with low pay, low qualifications and ghetto-like concentrations in the city.

Today's reality of migrants from a hundred and sixty countries interacting with the local population, with all their thousands of permutations and combinations, results in communication in the German language, concerning common Austrian national and local issues rather than intra-group issues.

This reality has long superseded

a) the two monolingual groups oriented towards the languages and cultures of their places of origin and

b) indeed the very idea that there are two clear groups of "Austrians" and "foreigners", who can be put into boxes regardless of their internal variations, facing each other across a divide.

The effects of travel, study and work abroad, television, consumer patterns, cultural consumption of international trends and cultural products and the ethereal web community have also changed static behavioural patterns amongst the 'original' Austrian population. New trans-ethnic and trans-national milieus, families and networks are the reality of a social and cultural dynamics that have been described as "superdiversity" (ref. Vertovec). New work structures overlap with living and recreational uses, in time, function and in physical space.

Can housing be integrative?

Immigrants and globalized populations are here to stay, and these individuals have rights and duties, which are constant topics of discussion. What is lacking is a realization and exploitation of the positive potential of immigration, of the fact that a majority of migrants, apart from many who were forced to flee, are driven by motivation and ambition, without which they probably would not have taken the difficult, huge step into an uncertain new world. It is this potential that should be tapped to boost innovation and attractiveness of a city.

The European city in history has profited from immigration of the best people from other countries, cities, provinces, or from the countryside. These newcomers often created problems initially. However, in the long run, they contributed to the strength, wealth and dynamism of the city. Additionally, it is clear that the current demographics of Europe demand a certain influx of immigrants to uphold macro-economic structures such as working populations, taxes, pensions, competitiveness, and productivity and to strengthen international trade through the diaspora effect.

Due to the pre-eminent role that housing continues to play in this changing world, we should focus and strengthen the integrative role of housing in the city.

The first part of the study thus establishes some facts and principles of living in the European city and overviews the social, administrative and political situation in Vienna with regard to council housing as well as housing associations which operate as for-profit or non-profit private organizations. The political and legal framework which defines and regulates the existence of migrants in Austria in daily life, as well as populist attitudes and media coverage are outlined with a critical commentary and suggestions for improvement.

Deficits, challenges and principles

Due to a lack of intercultural knowledge and competence within the population at large and amongst architects, planners, administrators and politicians in particular, the entire area of migration is either ignored or seen as a dangerous minefield, resulting in desolate urban spaces and residential areas that do not support integration and diversity. Conversely, public and semi-public space in residential areas are indeed places where diversity could flourish, provided they are sensitively and well designed. However, building by-laws, housing subsidy regulations and planning practice largely ignore the importance and potential of these spaces to reduce damage, vandalism and the decline of neighbourhoods, all of which come at a high cost, or their potential to improve the quality of the city and the quality of life.

This study reacts to this situation and undertakes a search for a new integrative and intercultural language for living in the city, to identify tools and strategies to steer physical interventions and structural processes to actively support diversity.

To this end an analysis of desirable principles pertaining to living in the European city was carried out. A short summary follows:

1. Diversity is not restricted to the question of immigration, but includes hybrid and emerging identities and lifestyles, milestones and life stages, and changing family structures of residents of all ages. Identities are now changed, adopted and discarded within the course of a single day
2. Density and a mix of different uses are crucial to social and economic diversity. Multifunctionality is the basis for vibrant and growing urban areas.
3. Integration is best achieved via intercultural activities - involving individuals and issue-based or activity-based groups rather than ethnic groups, of multiple or mixed ethnicities and identities including autochthonous individuals - rather than the "multicultural" approach of subsidizing ethnic groups and sub-groups, a paternalistic approach that sometimes backfires, leading to ghetto formation and radicalization within subgroups.
4. Conflicts are part of growing up, whether as individuals or as societies. Thus an absolute avoidance of conflict is neither possible nor desirable, and should not be the basis of public policy. The city can assist and mediate, but people and groups must learn to negotiate and solve their differences peacefully – after all that is how urban society works, and how democracy and women's rights were developed. Thus public spaces should not be planned to keep certain groups of people like teenagers and senior citizens apart from each other – that would be the easy way out but it would solve nothing really.
5. Although it is the obligation of immigrants to adjust their actions and modernize their thinking to the reality of a Western European society three hundred years after the Enlightenment, it's not just immigrants who are expected to contribute to integration by learning the language and the rules of the game. It also lies upon the host society to learn other languages and international customs, to be tolerant towards other dress codes and customs, to have an open, non-patronising attitude towards other societies and to be ready to engage and negotiate with neighbours with different lifestyles.

6. The “re-conquest of public space for all residents” (ref. Krummacher et al.) and a differentiation of spaces and their character should be a priority over quantitative listing and provisions for single groups.
7. The “contact hypothesis” by Gordon Allport, which suggests that low-level contact is a beginning and can lead to better neighbourly relations, is a basis for the belief that architectural and planning measures and programmes should be in place to enable this contact. After all, it is everyday life situations which define the quality of cooperation and interaction between groups and the integration of sub-groups.
8. A better result on the ground is often the product of intelligent planning at no extra cost, but the necessary measures and good results are definitely worth some extra money. The measures to enable or provide better common spaces should be legally defined and provided for by the administration, the subsidizing agencies and private developers directly connected with a project as well as the private and non-profit sectors at large.

Best Practices

Based on these principles, the second part of the study looks at completed housing projects in several countries where special design efforts have been undertaken to improve contact and communication at various levels of public and semi-public space. Even if not specifically designed for diverse populations, their creation of interactive and integrative space in and around residences has been studied, with a systematic analysis of how they work. This analysis of spaces, hierarchies and residential and social structures is graphically presented to enable at a glance an understanding of the way each project is organized, and a comparison with other, completely different types of projects. A qualitative summary of what can be learnt from these projects rounds up the look at best practices.

Additionally, ‘software’ best practices that strengthen and expand intercultural communication and cooperation have been documented.

Methods and suggestions for achieving better spaces in and around housing: A pattern language

Neither a purely physical-planning approach nor a simply sociological approach can adequately address the challenges of “superdiversity”. Both have to be put to work together.

Therefore, the third part of our study proposes desirable “patterns” (ref. based on “A Pattern Language” by Alexander et al.). The dozens of proposed patterns are both ‘hardware’ proposals involving design guidelines for better housing spaces as well as ‘software’ proposals for animating these areas. They place a primacy on the importance of public and semi-public space to the quality of urban life. They work in tandem to strengthen activities and community building and are proposed at various scales: from the housing master plan level, neighbourhoods, third

place, fourth place, access and circulation, interface to the living unit and ultimately the plan of the residential unit itself.

This pattern language is not conceived as a "Bible", but to sensitize, inform and inspire architects, planners, developers, city administrations and all concerned to study specific situations and develop their own appropriate pattern languages for each project.

The way forward

Finally, we propose improvements to the system and approach to housing design and suggest all concerned to continually keep themselves up to date on the constant changes in the way people live and use public space, and to continually educate themselves in cultural and intercultural competence and diversity management. We are all in an ongoing learning process in this field. We hope to animate a fruitful debate and invite you, the reader, to communicate your ideas, criticism and suggestions to us, so that we may together better develop and improve our housing areas and cities in future.

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