

„Hot spots“ of social conflict and area renewal offices in multi-storey blocks in Vienna

The study is based on the assumption that in Vienna there are “hot spots” of social conflict or at least a potential for conflict, which can be located in certain districts as well as in certain residential facilities. Therefore the study aims at identifying the *factors* that are perceived as constituting a *reduction in the quality of life*. Furthermore we wanted to find out whether these factors are overlapping in certain districts leading to the creation of potentially risky areas.

We interviewed inhabitants of five Viennese quarters where we expected the conditions of housing and living to be determined by several unfavourable factors: in two council houses in the 10th and one in the 21st district, in a council house as well as a in private multi-storey building in the 20th district, and in various private multi-storey buildings in the 16th district. The 25 interviewees represented both locals and the immigrants, various age groups and both sexes.

The interviews focussed on their expectations of “good housing” and their satisfaction with their habitation – the apartment as well as the general living environment –, experiences of conflicts with regard to housing, their sense of security in the living environment, and their experiences of deprivation as well as their fear of the future. So we tried to overview different relevant factors which are experienced as reducing the quality of life.

In the end we did not find any “hot spots” of social conflict in Vienna that can be compared to the “banlieue” in Paris or risky areas in other European cities. The interviewees often talked about conflicts that were carried out in a way to be described as “actions speak louder than words”, but they rarely reported on arguments that had escalated. Conflicts that even aimed at “destroying the enemy” were not mentioned. “Hot spots” are areas that are perceived as dangerous or at least insecure, and nobody perceived the interview zones as such.

But in nearly all of the interviews, on the one hand *interferences with regard to “good housing”* were stated, and on the other hand efforts for their *communicative resolution* were widely missing. However, housing policy cannot solely provide the requirements for a “peaceful coexistence”. Other policy areas need to be addressed, too. This affects especially the status of migrants – for many interviewees “the foreigners” are seen as “the main problem” in living together. Migrants remain foreigners, which are held responsible for all annoyances. This is mainly because they are socially marginalized and outclassed.

Satisfaction with the apartment does not seem to influence the disposition to getting involved in conflicts. Some interviewees are very satisfied with their apartment and nonetheless they are regularly involved in conflicts. Others criticised their apartment, but they never got into arguments. Most of the interviewees find themselves between these two extremes.

Identification with the housing estate plays a more important role, especially with regard to council houses. When the housing estate is highly valued by the individual – and even if it has a bad reputation, the identification seems to be strong. This high esteem can lead to a high satisfaction of the inhabitants, but it can also lead to a higher readiness for criticism and conflict, aiming at the preservation of what they value as beautiful and good. When the housing estate is not perceived as attractive and valuable, annoyances – f. ex. dirt – seem to play a relatively smaller role.

Elderly people in particular or inhabitants who have been living for a long time in council houses perceive a change of the council houses' image to the worse. Some interviewees are proud of the concept of the council houses, and the negative image, which is influenced predominantly by the media, upsets them. It gets more and more difficult for them to identify themselves with their tenement and therefore an essential part of their lives gets lost.

In this context the subject "*foreigners in council houses*" is a highly emotive one. The loss of reputation of certain town districts as well as of council houses is blamed on the moving in of migrants. The coexistence of different life styles is perceived as problematic by some interviewees, but at the same time what exactly is the problem of living together remains vague.

All in all, there is only *little systematic arbitrage* between conflicting parties. The interviewees also reported only rarely that somebody had intervened in a conflict as a third party. This is a role played mostly by caretakers – but not necessarily in order to arbitrate; sometimes they also are the instigators of conflicts. Nevertheless, in most cases the interviewees appreciated the caretakers' interventions.

It was a big surprise that the *area renewal offices* are hardly known. Out of 18 interviewees who are living in council houses, only three (all of them being native-born Austrians) have contacted an area renewal office; it was obvious that most of the others had not even heard about this institution.

After analyzing the conflict potential that had come to the fore in the interviews as well as the handling of conflicts and the expectations of the interviewees, we drafted *recommendations* for the housing department of Vienna to allow for an efficient settling of social conflicts. We suggested f. ex. a campaign to improve the council houses' image, and the re-introduction of the role of the caretaker, albeit not the "old kind of caretaker", responsible for the cleaning and the maintenance of order, who only assumed communicative and social duties when he wanted to do so. It is fundamental to redefine the role of the caretaker, who would be still responsible for order, but also trained in social work and mediation.