Living and quality of living in Vienna residential towers

A study commissioned by the Municipal Department 50 (Housing Research) to living in high-rise housing - living and quality of living in Vienna's high-rise buildings

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Initial situation

In Vienna, high-rise housing had for a long time only a minor relevance. There are relatively few high-rise buildings in Vienna, and this applies both to architectural modernism (Hochhaus Herrengasse), the period after World War II (Körner-Hof) as well as to the period of urban expansion and suburbanization (Alterlaa, Mitterhofergasse), as in many European cities high rise housing boomed, especially in the social sector where for a long time high-rise constructions coined the image of towers as potential "slums in the sky" (Lynsey Hanley). Like in other European cities, also in Vienna high-rise housing is getting increased attention in recent years, both in the field of urban planning and among property developers and investors. Arguments are putting questions of urbanity, the attractiveness in the global city competition, but also the shortage of affordable housing in the context of dynamic population growth: Demographers expect an increase in the population of Vienna from the current 1.75 to over 2 million already in 2030. The also on international levels much-debated issues of the socio-spatial embedding of high rise buildings, of its housing quality and living culture, also in terms of its social and economic sustainability in vertically compressed housing, forms the starting point of the study.

Contents and goals

The concrete aim of the study was to find out to what extent high-rise residential housing, pronounced in the context of urban growth, respond to the increasing demand for high quality and affordable housing, and to what extent towers are addressing specific living cultures and lifestyles, and with which urban and socio-spatial challenges residential towers are relying. Following up on an exploratory pilot study by fall of 2013, and by combing quantitative and qualitative approaches, by means of a comparative case study approach, social structure related aspects ("who lives in high-rise buildings") and socio-cultural issues ("how do they live") had been investigated. The study examined how living in high-rise buildings is subjectively

experienced and perceived by residents, and how different dimensions of quality of living are evaluated (functional, social, social-psychological, aesthetic, economic); to which extent housing and residential correspond with the housing needs, and in which way high rise apartment buildings mobilize specific issues and concerns; how high-rise residential buildings are perceived from outside (image, attractiveness, neighborhood situation), also with regard to the urban placement and socio-spatial embedding in the city; finally, wo which extent high-rise housing is attracting specific socio-cultural styles and target groups?

Beside a typing of high-rise buildings, the results of the study help to identify characteristic challenges that arise in connection with living in high-rise buildings, be it in terms of its suitability for everyday use (accessibility, technical vulnerability), the social fabric (neighborhood) or in an external (urban and socio-spatial integration in the urban district) position.

Methodology

Based on the results of the exploratory pilot study, and in consultation with the commissioner of the research, five residential towers had been selected for investigation, based on different selection criteria such as architectural design, ownership structure, city location, and construction period. The towers include four residential units from the recent construction period after 2000 (Monte Verde Tower, Hochhaus Simmering, Hochstädtplatz, K6-Tower) and a tower from the 1970s (Geiselbergstraße) for comparison purposes. Core of the study formed a standardized questionnaire, constructed around thematic issues such as satisfaction with housing, evaluation of neighborhood, evaluation of the building and its environment, use of common spaces, conceptions of living, housing styles etc. A total of 36% of the inhabitants could be reached. The sample was controlled against administrative data from the population register of the MA 23; also additionally data provided by the developers were used.

The quantitative survey was accompanied by a series of in-depth interviews with residents, interviews with groundskeepers, representatives of housing associations and people from the neighborhood were carried out with the aim to complement the picture. For the analysis and evaluation of the socio-spatial embedding participant observation took place. Online searches (journalist articles, resident online-forums, public documents) helped to learn about the public image. Additional expert interviews were carried out in particular concerning the use of common space.

Results and conclusions

Case studies and survey allow a typing of the selected high-rise buildings, with regard to the financing model, ownership structure, equipment, target groups and city location. Thus we find

the type of 'investor residential building' for economically more powerful target groups (Monte Verde Tower) and the 'barrier-free, subsidized housing' for the middle class in an industrial area (K6) as well as types of 'socially-mixed vertical densification' in an inner city neighborhood (Hochstädtplatz) and polycentric urban region (Simmering), finally the type of 'prefabricated housing in peripheral location' (Geiselbergstraße). A common feature of the newer skyscrapers is their symbolic function as architectural landmark in a changing urban structure, in particular the polycentric city.

Even though the investigated residential towers differ with respect to their location, their ownership structure, their architecture and not least their demography and social configuration; high-rise housing represents, at least in the investigated examples, primarily a form of housing for (different milieus of the) social middle classes. Even if, in some cases, the threshold of the entrance fee is reduced to a relatively low degree (e.g. through Superförderung), or if, as in other cases, social mix is produced by including facilities such as assisted living or student apartments: the proportion of economically less well-off residents is rather small. In contrary, economically more powerful residents are very often directly addressed. These groups see their dwelling often also as a long-term economic value and investment, also the symbolic value of the tower is highly appreciated (synonymous with modernity and cosmopolitanism; "apartment with view"). This is particularly pronounced in the type of investor housing, where the proportion of higher qualified people, both older and younger, the latter often couples or young families, are dominant. At the same time, high rise buildings know vertical forms of social differentiation. More expensive condominiums and apartments are in the upper floors (panoramic view, brightness, calmness), and so does the social status of the residents sink by the lower floor layers; disturbance from noise, lack of view and light, heavy winds are particularly acute there. It seems important to be aware of the possible negative effects of those cleavages.

In the survey a high resident satisfaction was found, this is also reflected in a strong intention to stay as well as in the fact that a large majority would recommend this apartment building to friends and acquaintances. An exception is the housing estate of the 1970s where a larger proportion of residents are already retired and where less pronounced housing satisfaction also brings different and life-stage-based demands on housing. In all estates, respondents evaluate as advantages of living in a high-rise building the view and the prestige, most important disadvantages concern external influences (wind, heat, noise), but also social stress (anonymity), and the considerable cost burden.

Living in the residential tower corresponds with individualized housing needs and living experience. Also in this respect, living in high-rise building represents a form of housing for the middle classes. The survey underlines the high importance of the own dwelling comparing to

other life-domains. Key aspects are security, retreat and intimacy, and the accessibility both of green areas and city center. Based on the survey, two socio-cultural lifestyles seem to be particularly attracted by towers: the so called "materialists", i.e. residents with high career ambitions and oriented toward economic success, and "creative people", for example the new self-employed. For both milieus individualized life and living styles are characteristic; they are not attached to their neighbors neither to the urban neighborhood, their social relations are stretched out over the city. Families or individuals with less privatized and individualized life and living styles feel less well in the towers and intend less often to stay permanently. In particular high-priced segments support the orientation toward the individualized private sphere, ownership increases the interest in maintaining the (economic) value, the wish to participate actively in the neighborhood is not strongly pronounced.

Living in the residential tower is, in the investigated towers, characterized by a fragile social cohesion. Perimeter and intensity of neighborly relations and activities are restricted: About half of the respondents reported to have no contact with other residents. Activities among neighbors are relatively rare and selective. In some towers stronger mechanisms of informal social control are established (preserving order, cleanliness, and safety). Neighborly disputes arising in connection with the use of common areas, a fact that requires professionally trained mediation. Greater participation in neighborhood activities, including the organization of the tenants' interests was observed in only one of the analyzed towers, against the particular background of a conflict with the house management. Designed as contact or interaction zones, common areas (most of which are available by appointment only) do not meet the intended function. In general, common areas are less used as to be expected. Some common areas are appreciated as prestige factor (e.g. spa areas). Collective activities find an echo primarily of they are lifestyle-oriented (e.g. Nordic walking groups). The study shows that typical meeting places like staircases or laundry room as well as officially as "common spaces" defined places are less important than e.g. the elevator which is experienced as relevant for communication even it represents, at the same time, an important source of insecurity and fear. This is evident especially in the situations of unexpected encounter with unknown neighbors or non-residents. In high-rise buildings with mixed use (clinical, social facilities, gastronomy) uncertainty is perceived even more. Thus, the security issue refers not only to manifest criteria such as criminality or vandalism but in particular to the dimension of behavioral uncertainty in regular encounters with unknown persons in an anonym environment. As international research has shown, this situation creates social stress and "social overload". Residential towers may therefore be seen as psychologically and socially vulnerable entities. This underlines the necessity to provide a system of fixed and professional house keeper who fulfills a vital social mediating function, also with regard to networking and information.

High-rises residential buildings are also technically vulnerable entities. For this reason, safety is a key issue for residents, and this is always also linked with the technical infrastructure of the buildings. The security aspect concerns not only the necessary maintenance of the housing and its infrastructure, e.g. elevators, fire alarm system, central heating, ventilation systems. All of these features must continuously be serviced, renewed and controlled and form an enormous cost factor compared to traditional housing estates. They are a source both of physical and psychological vulnerability. The implementation of a fixed property (facility) management responds to this challenge. This institution increases, both on an objective and subjective level, safety, e.g. through an early detection of technical defects etc. A fixed facility management may also create an interface between house management and residents, and contributes, that way, not only to preserve the value of the building, but also to residents' satisfaction.

A key topic refers to the structure and quality of urban environment of high-rise housing. New towers are often constructed in new urban district centers or former industrial areas, according to the model of polycentric city, and by creating a certain "island effect". The public space surrounding the towers is often characterized by impervious surfaces, unattractive for residents as well as for passersby's, often without sufficient playgrounds for children and recreation space, often they tend to meet only a transitory or representative capacity; sometimes they do not meet the minimum legal requirements. These results reflect particularly one of the adverse sides of the investor urban development. Developers seem not to be enough obliged to take their responsibilities to create open urban space as an added value not only for the residents but for the neighborhoods as a whole. The design and equipment of open space may strengthen of weaken the island effect.

To sum up, the results underline the need to identify structural tensions and to actively minimize their latent potential for conflict. Structural tensions exist along four lines: First, concerning the relation between the tower and its urban environment; second, inside the towers, the relationship between social mix and social inequality; third, the relation between the lifetime of a residential building and the changing needs of its (aging or changing) residents; fourth, with respect to the individualized lifestyles and social cohesion.