

# Building Cooperatives in Seestadt Aspern, Vienna

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The application procedure 2011/12 and the following cooperative and individual planning of five building cooperatives in Seestadt Aspern was a singular event in Vienna up to now: Never before were building plots offered in such a systematic way, fitting to the building cooperatives needs, for such projects. The procedure was quite successful in meeting these needs. A first step was made here and many more can follow now, learning from this procedure. The present study wants to add to this steps by securing data on the application procedure in Aspern and drawing conclusions for future similar procedures for other places.

## Research Questions and Method

The central topics of the present study are planning cooperation of the building cooperatives in Aspern and a comparison of their respective methods of participative planning. Research questions are, therefore: What forms of participative planning can be distinguished? What kinds and qualities of planning procedures can be observed, especially the ones directed at cooperation between the building cooperative projects? What effects can cooperative planning have in clusters of building cooperative projects? How was it possible to achieve cooperative planning procedures and how successful were they? How do these cooperative planning procedures influence “conventional” planning? What interactions with the urban surroundings are mentioned during the planning of building cooperatives? The study is based on methods of qualitative social research, mainly participant observation and qualitative interviewing.

## Building Cooperatives in Aspern

The application procedure for building cooperatives in Seestadt Aspern started after informal preliminary stages in May 2011 and went on through two phases with an intermediate phase until June 2012. During this procedure and after it, the groups planned, developed their legal and social structures, attracted new members and developed the cooperation for the D13 development site. In the near future, the groups will go on planning, start building and finally move in during the years 2014 and 2015.

## Similarities among the Building Cooperatives in Aspern

The five building cooperatives are quite similar in many respects because of the specific conditions at this site: In Vienna until today, only a rather small building cooperative

scene exists and the model is not well known. The group development for the projects in Aspern had to be done rather fast to be able to apply for the application procedure of the development agency Wien 3420 AG.

Further on, the situation in Seestadt Aspern is an unusual place for the common clientele of building cooperatives: Such projects usually are situated either in central, urban places or in the suburban sprawl around the cities. All these conditions added to the fact that the five building cooperatives in Aspern were all not initiated by the future inhabitants themselves, but by professional actors.

One could think that such a specific topic as community living is only interesting for a very small social segment and that therefore the different building cooperatives are all more or less similar. But actually, the five building cooperatives in Aspern are highly multi-faceted and all have their own different legal form, concepts and procedures. Nonetheless there exist, of course, several commonalities of the five groups. The five groups' cooperation is possible despite all the differences shows that the communality stated by the groups is taken very seriously.

Different to the other development sites in Aspern, the five buildings on D13 are an ensemble comparatively small-sized and adjusted onto each other. That means that there are of course five different buildings which stand for the respective group's specific identity; but still, these five houses are comparatively rigorously calibrated in relation to each other. This specific combination of distinctiveness and conformity will help the development site to be diverse and well-arranged at the same time although it is as dense as all the other housing sites.

### **Participative Planning in Housing**

Participation among the five building cooperatives in Aspern can generally be seen as intensive and advanced. The diversity of procedures is laudable because it produces a broad range to select from for interested people, following their specific needs. The supply would be even better if there existed forms of cooperatives that are initiated by future inhabitants themselves. That would be possible if there existed a regular offering of building sites for building cooperatives in Vienna, if the model would be better known in the broad public and if trust in the feasibility of such projects would rise. All the different procedures have their problems in relation to almost the same aspects for which they have to find solutions, e.g. in relation to the distribution of apartments, to community spaces or the representative function of the buildings. All these aspects depend more on the housing system, e.g. Vienna subsidized housing, than on a specific method for participation. To

sum up: There is no golden path of participation, but a diversity of approaches that all have their specific pros and cons and are applicable in specific situations.

### **Cooperative Planning**

From a urban planning perspective, the development of D13 with the five building cooperative projects was a success. But of course, further improvements are possible – two conclusions can be drawn from the procedure: It is either possible to do without architecture projects at the beginning of the application procedure. Instead of that, one could ask the groups for rough urban design concepts for the whole development site at the first submission. These concepts could then be used as a basis for further cooperative planning. The concepts would have to stay rather rough because when developed it is completely unknown how many and how large buildings/projects would be planned on the development site. Or, on the other hand, it is possible to completely do without any designs in the first phase and only finishes this phase with rough situational decisions for the groups without any further covenants. Following that, the groups would develop an urban design concept collaboratively. A third possibility is to set strict requirements for development layout, like is done usually in Tübingen. But this third way would lead to less elaborated concepts. No matter what procedure is chosen, it is highly important to define type and method of the necessary planning cooperation in the announcement so that all participant are able to prepare for that.

The positive rating of the procedure results by the jury can be agreed with unconditionally. Cooperative planning on the D13 development site was complicated and demanding, but the effort was worthwhile, considering the quality improvements of the ensemble and the different buildings. Especially the common open space will be of rather high quality. Open space design as well as the matching of plot boundaries and land use went quite well, but some conflicts came about with the latter. An external moderator could help to avoid or reduce that in future cooperation processes. The success of the procedure at D13 is also due to the participation of experienced building cooperative actors who could apply their procedure knowledge.

### **Summary**

The application procedure for building cooperatives in Aspern Seestadt can be seen as highly successful, as far as it can be determined today. Especially in regard of the fact that such a procedure was tried for the first time in Vienna here, this success has to be appreciated. But of course, there is also potential for further development. (6.1)

A very important question for the designation of development sites for building cooperatives is if these cooperatives shall be clustered or spread between “conventional” housing

projects. The clustering seems to be the better way because in Aspern cooperation and synergy between the groups has proved as successful. It might be useful to reduce tendencies towards separation through complementary measures. (6.2)

The application procedure led almost organically to cooperation between the groups. Although this was an implicit element of the procedure and the process was sometimes difficult, its importance has to be stressed: The matching of plot sizes and boundaries and of land use helped to improve the quality of buildings and the ensemble as a whole, as far as this can be determined today. Further on, the development of designs took longer than usually, it brought with it more intensive debate and deeper consideration of user necessities. Even more successful was cooperation for the common open space. The common assignment of a landscape planning office and the coordination of diverse needs led to a design that seems to achieve higher qualities than usually in subsidized housing in Vienna. (6.3)

The time used for the whole procedure was a useful minimum. It is hardly possible during the two months length of the first phase of the procedure to develop new groups or find enough new members for an existing core group. Therefore such a procedure needs enough advance. In the future, PR should be oriented more towards potential participants in a group and not so much towards professionals. The intermediate phase when plot matching took place would need either more time or a better structure. Therefore the matching process for plot delineation should be accepted and supported. Such a cooperation has the potential for conflict, but it also opens spaces for the projects to develop and therefore strengthens their quality. Additionally, the procedure is important for segmentation and diversity of the overall project. (6.4)

A procedure like the one in Aspern would need a continuous external moderator from the beginning, supported by external process knowledge. That could help save the creative cooperation of groups and simplify the cooperation procedure. Such a moderator could also help reducing the tendency towards overwhelming self-reference in groups and prevent temporary discontinuation of cooperation. (6.5)

The conditions of the procedure were, on one hand, adapted to the specificity of the building cooperatives, but they were, on the other hand, still mainly oriented towards the usual receivers. These conditions should be adapted stronger in relation to the needs of building cooperatives. Administrative conditions for subsidies for new construction are much more complex as the ones for refurbishment; building cooperatives should be considered as receivers here. (6.6)

Building cooperatives need new forms of communication compared to „conventional“ housing. Some attempts were made in this respect during the Aspern procedure. But in

this respect, there is still a lot of further approaches possible, especially oriented towards laypersons and the broad public who does not know the concept of building cooperatives today. This is especially true for the first phase of such a procedure when interested people shall be able to develop groups. For the long-term success of this concept, public commitment of city politics is vital. (6.7)

In addition to the matching of urban design/architecture and the common planning of open space, synergies between building cooperatives can be observed mainly in relation to the community spaces. These plans are not developed very far until now. If this additional matching will also be successful cannot be said today. Also not assessable, but useful would be synergies in construction work. (6.8)

The meeting of the five building cooperatives with all responsible departments of city administration was highly successful and helpful for the process. (6.9)

Ground lease (“Baurecht”) is generally a very useful model, but the conditions for it should be made more attractive in the future. (6.10)

The recent procedure at D13 showed again that an information center for building cooperatives inside city administration would be very important. Such an agency could be in charge of a database of interested people and groups, it could advise, inform and network and maintain communication with administration. (6.11)