

A modern building with a glass facade and a child on a bicycle. The building has a unique design with vertical slats and large glass panels. A child wearing a blue helmet is riding a blue bicycle on a paved sidewalk in the foreground. The building's interior is visible through the glass, showing a person on a balcony and a bright light fixture. The overall scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

THE ANALYSIS OF RESIDENT FORUMS AS AN INNOVATIVE TOOL OF HOUSING RE- SEARCH?

ABSTRACT



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**STUDY ON BEHALF OF
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BACKGROUND

In the course of the Web 2.0 chat rooms and internet forums have been popular long before the advent of facebook & co. and have been able to attract a variety of users, who could use these platforms to discuss and exchange all kinds of information.

An interesting special form of such communication platforms are internet forums that are spatially and thematically oriented towards specific user groups, namely the residents of certain housing estates. Such 'virtual staircases' often enjoy great popularity as the number of registered users and posted contributions show.

In this 'safe space' residents speak relatively freely and directly about issues that matter for them especially in terms of their individual daily living and their coping with it. In addition, the themes are generated by themselves and are not imposed by outsiders. Due to this thematic independence and variety, the analysis of such forums differs from conventional housing research: Basically any type of statement is of interest for the investigating of the life-world perspective of the residents. To what extent this alternative data represents a viable source shall be clarified in this study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To our knowledge a similar study on resident forums has not been conducted before in the German speaking world. Therefore this study follows an explorative approach in order to answer basic questions in how far the analysis of such forums and their contents can contribute to housing research. However, there are some leading questions that will be answered in the course of this project:

Who are the users of these forums and in which stage of their residential biographies are they?

Which topics dominate the forums and to what extent do they correlate to the everyday life in the housing estate? What durability, frequency and intensity do these topics have?

To what extent can the analysis inform about the identification with the housing estate, the specific building or the place in general?

Does a forum help to create a 'virtual community', which is either complementary to or a replacement of the real community?

To what extent can the results from the analysis of such forums, as a specific form of communication and self-expression, be implemented into housing research?

STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

Four resident forums serve as a basis for the analysis: 'Wienerberg City Forum', 'Alt-Erlaa Net' 'Kommunikationsplattform Aspernsiedlung' and 'Monte Laa Net'. These forums cover a wide range of large housing estates from different eras, with different architectures and different underlying city planning concepts. From the sections of the forums, which are specifically dedicated to dwelling (in the estate), a total of 1,000 threads, which contain approximately 10,000 postings were chosen for the analysis.

First we will provide a brief description of the formal aspects of the user forums, such as the structure, accessibility and the internal differentiation by topic and user groups. In order to examine these aspects of the forums, especially the question of the types of users, the forums were not only formally analyzed, but also a longtime moderator and administrator together with other active users and initiators of the Monte Laa Forum were interviewed.

The second part provides a quantitative evaluation of the forums according to the following aspects: the distribution of themes and spatial contexts, the intensity of themes (e.g. which topics are discussed rather superficially and which are discussed in depth and thus have a higher level of concern and 'arousal') and the comparison of the four housing schemes. For the quantitative survey a thematic and spatial code-scheme has been developed, according to which the individual threads have been categorized.

The last part provides a qualitative analysis of representative threads (based on the quantitative distribution of the subjects and their level of concern) according to aspects of residential satisfaction and sources of irritation, appropriation of space, and the virtual community. This offers a deeper insight into the dynamics of discussions in these forums and ultimately contributes to answering the preceding research questions.

In general, both the quantitative and qualitative analysis focuses on the areas of the four residents forums, which are dedicated to the topic of dwelling and the daily life in the housing estates. All other areas within a forum that go beyond this scope (such as bulletin boards or gossip boards) were not considered.



RESULTS

The quantitative analysis shows that certain themes dominate both in terms of their frequency and in terms of their intensity. The categories 'information exchange' and 'complaints / problems' have by far the highest share of threads and posts. It is remarkable in this context that positive experiences are almost never the trigger for starting a thread, but rather negative experiences or various problems. However, in terms of contents, the user forums differ considerably from estate to estate: In the case of Aspern the topics are often related to the basic urban concept of the housing scheme (terraced houses, fences, etc.), while in the case of Wienerbergcity discussions on noise pollution are very frequent.

The qualitative analysis of selected threads exposes some key aspects of housing in terms of residential satisfaction and the importance of the Forum to create a virtual or real community.

The exemplary analysis of the four threads that revolve around complaints and problems of various kinds particularly sheds light on the relation between 'sources of irritation' and the residential satisfaction. The satisfaction with the housing situation seems to be mainly dependent on the subjective perception of certain problems or sources of irritation as some users are more sensitive to noise pollution, vandalism, the behaviour of neighbours and technical problems than others. Some residents are even led to move away by certain problems (at least that is how they argue in the forum – the mixture of negative circumstances that led them to move out cannot be determined), other residents consider these circumstances as natural aspects of living in a larger housing estate. In addition, past experiences influence the perception of the current quality of living.

Also the theme of what we call 'appropriation of space', which is present in the two threads 'Dachsperrre' and 'Leerer Raum', shows interesting and seemingly elementary factors for a high residential satisfaction. In the case of the 'Dachsperrre', which is discussed in the Alt-Erlaa Forum, it becomes apparent that freedom of movement within a housing settlement clearly helps to feel comfortable and to be able to pursue ones interests. For many forum users any form of restriction represents a massive and intolerable interference in their everyday lives. 'Good' living obviously means, among other things, to be able to move about freely at any time, if only for a few minutes and for activities such as taking a stroll or enjoying the view. The sheer knowledge that not all areas are accessible at any time can cause a sense of being constricted and being patronized. In the case of a vacant room in Monte Laa it becomes clear how much its use - whether it is actually real, planned, or a fantasy – influences the perceived quality of living. If a certain use meets ones needs or enriches the everyday life it receives the greatest support – if this is not the case, as exemplified in the discussion about the cultural centre, the possible use could even pose a threat: The own radius of action is not extended but limited, as undesirable elements such as persons or emissions (e.g. noise) are associated with it.

It is interesting to note that for some residents neighbourhood relations and community activities within the housing estate weigh more than 'solid' factors such as noise pollution. According to the MonteLaa Forum founder, people looking for an apartment were convinced to purchase a condominium due to the numerous social activities in MonteLaa and in spite of their concerns about aircraft noise.

In this context other research studies on housing that are applying conventional survey methods produce similar results: residential satisfaction, or 'good living' is dependent on neighbourhood relations, security in the estate and its image (results of a prior study on Alt-Erlaa).

Regarding different phases of use of the forums and residential biographies of the residents, some interesting conclusions can be drawn: the average age influences the use and acceptance of resident forums. It also seems that the forums are preferably used by new residents. They utilize the forum as a convenient medium (with a broad reach within the estate) in order to get basic information that is important when you are new in an area. For this purpose, this new way of communication offers a great advantage: You do not have to know anyone and you can enter a virtual public without any barriers and while staying anonymous.

Moreover, it seems that with a certain age some forums are becoming saturated: If no new residents are moving in and the neighbourly relations have been established, one of the main motivations to actively participate in the forum ceases to exist. In this 'mature phase' the forums tends to be dominated by regular users, who rather post in order to satisfy their need for attention than for acquiring information.

Resident forums are a special type of 'virtual community', whose members are also part of a real group of people that share a physical social space. The overlapping of the virtual and the real community is sometimes more, sometimes less pronounced – the virtual community is not necessarily congruent with the real community.

Overall, the analysis of resident forums provides great added value: For a researcher in the field of housing these forums offer much more unfiltered opinions and statements than other survey methods, where people tend to be more concerned about political correctness and politeness. Moreover, most other empirical approaches are restricted to certain themes; in the forums the users themselves determine the topics. For this reason, the analysis of the resident forums makes an important contribution to research on residential satisfaction and offers responsible institutions an unbiased view of the problems of the residents and the required action.

