

Open Spaces in Residential Areas – Best Practice

Good Examples from Vienna and Other European Cities



Vienna, november 2009

Funded by:

City of Vienna, Municipal Department 50, Vienna Housing Research

Dr. Wolfgang Förster, Mag. Christa Brezna, Mag. Georg Fellner

Project team: Dipl. Ing.ⁱⁿ Dr.ⁱⁿ Gisa Ruland,
Technisches Büro für Landschafts- und Freiraumplanung
Prof.ⁱⁿ Dipl. Ing.ⁱⁿ Maria Auböck,
Mag. Janós Kárász,
Atelier Auböck & Kárász
Dipl. Ing. Gerhard Rennhofer, Landschaftsarchitektur

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Summary

In terms of quality of life, time after time Austrians say that they would prefer to live in the countryside.

The Viennese too hanker for green areas close to where they live. However, the high and continually increasing housing density in Vienna poses specific planning and financial challenges to architects and landscape designers.

In residential areas with multi-story housing, the quality of the open spaces is particularly important, as here a wide range of needs and requirements compete for a limited amount of space. Affordable living space needs to be linked with the demands on private, semi-public and public useable space and with sustainable urban development.

This research is providing new inspiration for the debate on the quality of the open spaces in these residential areas, with the situation and quality of open spaces in residential areas of Vienna and other comparable European cities being a key subject. Interviews with experts and an analysis of contemporary literature outline current experiences and expert opinions.

Good examples and individual aspects – “best practice” – from areas of different cities, including Amsterdam, Berlin, Zurich, Munich, Utrecht, Dresden, Linz and Malmö are presented and interpreted.

Aspects and themes that are important for the emergence and quality of open spaces in residential neighbourhoods and that are discussed in this study include:

- the overall urban design framework
- the involvement of citizens in developments
- the range and form of open spaces aimed at a variety of different publics
- the perception and form of visible and invisible barriers and bridges
- the selection of materials
- the selection of plants
- stimulating atmospheres
- optimal maintenance concepts
- creative organisational forms for property developers and contractors
- quality assurance at all planning levels and throughout the entire planning process

Quality aspects - irrespective of the legal, organisational and planning process-related requirements - that have been mentioned primarily in recent years in the literature and/or by experts in connection with open spaces in residential areas are:

- the functions that open areas assume and the usability and quality of experience offered by them

Summary

- Questions such as who is spending time in the living environment? which functions have to be fulfilled? what needs are there? what are people's experiences of the living environment? are all part of the background to this.
- Usability, the effectiveness of the experience offered and security play a pivotal role in the quality of the living environment. In order to achieve these goals, the organisation and features of the open spaces are particularly important.

Key Areas

A summary selection of general conditions is presented and illuminated in the four key areas:

- Open space – experience
- Open space – usability
- Open space – organisation
- Open space – features.

Open space – experience attempts to illustrate the atmosphere that can be created with carefully developed open spaces. In addition, aspects that promote feelings of wellbeing among the residents are presented. Spending time in an open space can enhance residents' wellbeing and encourage them to stay in the neighbourhood.

Open space – usability looks at how citizens can be involved in planning processes.

Examples such as their participation in the development of the Kabelwerk project in Vienna's 12th district of Meidling, or the process of transformation of the open spaces in the Bremen district of Tenever show various ways in which citizens can get involved and that can lead to the creation of useable and accepted open spaces.

Regular, in-depth contact with the residents can help to ensure that their wishes and ideas are incorporated into the planning and implementation.

Open space – organisation outlines fundamental quality aspects, covering urban development, the general development of the open space in an area and the wide range of types of open space.

An urban configuration that incorporates appropriate open spaces into its planning makes it possible to develop suitable subspaces for private, community and public use. A detailed space allocation plan to meet the different needs, clear hierarchies and boundaries between the subspaces and a connection to neighbouring urban spaces and infrastructure are only a few of the aspects that promote usability and the effectiveness of the experience that they are able to offer.

Open space – features summarises a range of detailed aspects of plant and materials selection in open spaces by way of examples.

The selection of plants and materials, which is tailored to the individual locations, promotes their usability and the effectiveness of the experience. When making a selection, factors such as aging potential, maintenance and preservation and especially workmanship must be taken into account.

Summary

Planning Process

To make certain qualities possible in housing estate and multi-story residential building living environments, in addition to these four key areas, appropriate standards must also be specified in the planning process.

General conditions must be set out at an early stage, i.e. during urban development competitions for new residential areas, which then at the detailed level can lead to open spaces being designed and constructed that the residents can actually use.

The interactions between the planning levels and the clear incorporation of the requirements into planning law and the relevant plans have a particular significance here. The cities of Linz, Zurich, Munich and Vienna are used as examples of how and where it is possible to incorporate such requirements into planning law. In addition to the statutory elements, framework guidelines, design manuals or similar specifications provided by the cities are useful complements that help to frame and convey quality concepts.

Monitoring of execution by specialists employed by the cities promotes quality assurance. Ensuring that the desired benefits are set out in detail contributes to an enormous improvement in quality in this respect.

Depending on the legal situation, a variety of financing models are possible in Europe's cities. In large cities such as Zurich, Copenhagen or Malmö, contributions to financing or to some extent the complete financing of infrastructure such as roads, schools, green public spaces and kindergartens etc. are expected from investors. The city of Vienna funds residential building projects through *wohnfonds_wien* (the Vienna fund for housing construction and urban renewal) and is able to specify certain quality standards or the coordination of construction – e.g. when building shared playgrounds.

The involvement of qualified experts in the planning process from the urban development level right through to implementation contributes to an improvement in the overall quality of building projects and open spaces. In particular, it is possible to pay attention to the planning and construction of open spaces with a high social utility value as part of the planning process. Cooperative planning procedures, such as that currently being trialled in "Aspern, Vienna's Urban Lakeside" in Vienna, are one way of jointly developing qualities and consolidating them throughout the planning stages. What is important is that such methods are not only applied in specific individual cases, but that they percolate through to the everyday planning processes of smaller projects too.

Maintenance

An additional aspect that must be taken into consideration from the very start is the organisation and quality of the maintenance of open spaces. Maintenance must be considered at the latest as part of the project development at the construction site level. Maintenance contracts with detailed service descriptions that specify the expected condition of the spaces, and maintenance by specialists enhance satisfaction among both residents and developers.

Furthermore, they minimise the turnover of residents, as demonstrated by an example in Göttingen.

Summary

High quality residential addresses are a prime concern for developers

Developing high quality residential addresses is one of the prime concerns of developers. This includes attractive open spaces around residential complexes. For this reason, individual property developers in Munich are now also paying attention to ensuring that the public spaces adjacent to their properties are designed and developed in tandem with their buildings.

The open spaces in residential neighbourhoods are considered by investors in many of Europe's cities as their development's calling card and are being designed accordingly.

Property development associations, such as those that are now being formed for some projects in Vienna, cf. Kabelwerk, promote the joint, meaningful development of open spaces.