

Lake City (Seestadt Aspern) Settlement Monitoring

A study commissioned by the Municipal Department 50 (Housing Research) and wien3420 Aspern Development AG

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Research team: Christoph Reinprecht (scientific head of the project), Cornelia Dlabaja (project management), Christoph Stoik, Johannes Kellner and Katharina Kirsch-Soriano da Silva

Research cooperation: Department of Sociology at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Vienna (Christoph Reinprecht, Cornelia Dlabaja), Competence Centre for Social Work at the University of Applied Sciences (Christoph Stoik, Johannes Kellner), Seestadt Aspern neighbourhood management (Katharina Kirsch-Soriano da Silva)

Initial situation

The development of the Lake City Aspern is one of the most important and largest European urban development projects. The project responds to the rapid and dynamic urban growth of Vienna on the demand for high-quality and affordable housing. At the same time, it reflects the international debate on urban transformation with its focus on issues such as urban compaction and densification (manifest also in the renaissance of high-rise buildings), environmental and mobility issues and aspects of shared economy (urban commons), all of which are on the agenda. As it is the case in the Lake City Aspern, in many cities the creation of new compact neighbourhoods takes place in connection with the conversion of former industrial or commercial buildings or land. There is also broad awareness to avoid earlier errors in city planning, in particular with regard to the experience of city expansion, suburbanization and urban renewal. The rejection of outdated functionalist concepts (separation of living and working space, mono-functional design of outdoor and traffic areas, etc.) is accompanied by the emergence of new principles of inclusive urban planning. This concerns the freedom from barriers (and the supply of local amenities and public goods such as transport, education, health and social services, playgrounds, green spaces), ecological standards in construction and renovation, as well as the implementation of normative concepts such as social mix and social sustainability. The aim of this study was to trace these issues and challenges in connection with the arrival of the first wave of new residents in the Lake City Aspern.

Contents and goals

The main object of the research was to observe (in the sense of a monitoring) the first phase of the settlement process which started in autumn 2014 with the arrival of the first new residents. The research interest focused on the social composition of the new residents (social class position, milieu differentiation, living- and housing-related lifestyles), the expectations and demands regarding the neighbourhood and the living environment, the use of public space, public transport and mobility or the availability of local amenities (food service, shopping possibilities, etc.), from the point of view of new residents as well as other actors involved in the production of the new neighbourhood. One main

concern was to understand the dynamics of the new social fabric also with regard to the production of social cohesion, potential social fractures and socio-spatial challenges.

By awarding this research grant, the City of Vienna expresses the high relevance of the Lake City Aspern project in urban policy, in particular regarding planning strategies and urban development; the successful implementation of the project is regarded as a relevant milestone in responding to the challenges of rapid urban growth and the need of affordable housing. The research aims to identify related issues, problems and contradictions as well as to assess social dynamics in terms of living environment, social area and neighbourhood. That way, the study intended to deliver scientific insights which may help to understand the ongoing settlement process, useful both for the forthcoming settlement processes in the Lake City Aspern as well as for other urban development projects.

Methodology

The research was based on a multi-stage research design. A screening of administrative and additional secondary data allowed a first overview of existing knowledge. Simultaneously, information and advertising material, as well as mass media and social media, were analysed with the aim to identify social representations and images which had been produced in the context of planning, campaigning and the recent settlement process, and which contribute to shape the new neighbourhood. A series of qualitative interviews with new residents and with experts involved in the planning and settlement process, together with field observations and a socio-spatial analysis form the qualitative part of the research. The results of these first qualitative and explorative research steps also formed the basis for the development of a standardized questionnaire which was finally carried out in form of an online survey among residents, comprising the core of the research project. The online survey was designed to obtain a more differentiated picture of the resident's social composition, their perception of housing situation, neighbourhood, public space and their preferences regarding lifestyle, use of public space or mobility behaviour. The synthesis of the individual research steps finally allows a detailed and precise characterization of the different aspects of the settlement process.

Results and conclusions

Differentiation of social milieus

One key result of the study refers to the milieu-specific differentiation of the population. By this it is meant that the new residents differ less in terms of class position but rather in relation to value-driven aspects of lifestyle. In other words, the settlement of the Lake City Aspern neighbourhood concerns a sociostructurally relatively homogeneous and socio-culturally more heterogeneous population. Beside specific household and family characteristics with a dominance of young family, young childless couples and young singles, the social milieus are defined by factors such as living and housing preferences, the meaning of neighbourhood, the willingness to participate actively in the neighbourhood, and behaviour-related issues of mobility, consumption and leisure. These aspects are of importance because they contribute significantly to an understanding of urban space as a context of everyday life and identity.

The survey concluded that residents who decided and clearly wished to move to the Lake City Aspern were more interested in being actively involved in their new living environment. These residents, preferring often the green environment, the use of smart technologies and shared spaces, represent a

kind of 'post-materialist' milieu. Other residents shared more 'materialistic' values (for example with regard to mobility behaviour or consumption type) or were more oriented on the apartment as private retreat. There are also categories of residents who had no clear preference for the Lake City Aspern, among them also some who felt under pressure, mostly due to economic reasons such as high housing costs; mobility expenses as a result of longer distances to and from workplace and unfulfilled expectations (missing consumption possibilities, noise pollution by construction activity, etc.) also serves as reason for frustration. These different milieu-characteristics denote the local social structure. They affect the feelings of belonging, and shape the individual relationship to neighbours and to the Lake City Aspern in general.

The observation that mainly middle class milieus had been addressed by the new neighbourhood does not mean that economic aspects are without concern. On the contrary, relatively high housing costs, e.g. for apartments built in the context of the *Wohnbauinitiative*, have an impact in favouring socioeconomically better situated groups. Further, the subsidized housing targets mainly members of the middle class with middle and lower income. It is important that most of the respondents state that with the move to the Lake City Aspern their housing expenses have increased significantly. On the one hand, the new residents belong to a relatively wealthy part of the Viennese population with comparatively high economic and cultural capital, and many of them wish to be actively involved in their neighbourhood (and this often concerns disproportionately the residents of co-housing projects). On the other hand, parts of the population suffer economic stress: complaining about high housing expenses, they expect a suitably arranged and functioning city with adequate infrastructure. In this respect, the results of the research are in a certain contrast with the political objective to create of affordable housing. It is likely that this issue is becoming increasingly important in the context of the forthcoming expansion and settlement phases.

An important aspect of the mentioned milieu differentiation is the often competing meaning of the city and public space. This juxtaposition of different concepts and meanings may be seen as strength. At the same time, it can also be a reason for tensions and conflicts. Tensions have been identified between urbanity-oriented milieus (creative classes, singles or couples without children) and suburban milieus (these include more leisure-oriented households and young families). Another field of tension is represented by the contrastive pair 'urban versus village' and which is related to aspects such as anonymity versus social control (the latter is functioning also via the use of social media). Other relevant fields of tension are represented by the concepts of a socially inclusive city (notion of 'solidarity') and commercialized city, or by (top down) paternalism versus a (bottom up) participatory approach which defines the residents as co-producers of their neighbourhood. As the study shows, participation and solidarity are demanding requirements to which residents may not wish or may not be able to respond to.

The milieu-related heterogeneity of the population corresponds to the general objective of socially mixed urban neighbourhoods. However, the observed milieu differentiation indicate some potential fractures and fault lines that should not be underestimated since they may cause mechanisms of social exclusion. The empirical data provide some evidence for social fractures already today, in particular with regard to value and lifestyle-based differences (suburban versus urbanity-oriented milieus, or with regard to mobility preferences, housing and consumption styles, practices of appropriation and use of public space, etc.) or the uneven economic scope of action of the new residents.

Diverse and partly conflicting interests and expectations

Another important result of the research refers to the variety and partly contradictory interests and expectations of the various actors involved. These also determine the social representations and images of high relevance in view of the production of the new neighbourhood. As shown, the branding of the Lake City Aspern addresses members of particular milieus. However, the social composition of the new population is far from being homogeneous: social tension lines have become visible and should be observed with attention, particularly in view of the forthcoming construction and settlement phases. An important aspect in this context is the heterogeneity of the actors involved in the production of the new neighbourhood. Relevant actors are not only those who are responsible for the planning and construction process, for marketing and sale; increasingly important are the new residents themselves as co-producers of their living environment. Their expectations concerning the urban environment which are based on specific social representations and images and reflected in everyday social and cultural activities, including social media, are (partly) in contention with the concepts of the various institutional, economic or (mass) media actors. Referring to the research results, we may not only expect that the issues requiring attention concerning the future development of the Lake City Aspern will change over time, but we may assume that the demands and expectations of the new arrivals will be less and less controllable and manageable. Both the issues and social representations will be increasingly shaped by the heterogeneity of actors, and especially by the residents themselves.

The high public and political attention increases the expectations regarding successful development of the Lake City Aspern. On the one hand, this applies to the scheduled and technically flawless production of physical infrastructure, buildings and open/public spaces as well as to the organisation of the new neighbourhood along the functions of housing, commerce, transport and employment. On the other hand, this concerns the implementation of the various aspects of the master plan such as the concepts of public space and mobility (transport), the intention to develop the Lake City Aspern as a vibrant, urban and open neighbourhood, or the socio-political objectives of affordability and social mix. At the same time, the Lake City Aspern is defined as an urban laboratory that allows to develop and to apply innovations, alternative approaches and new solutions. These divergent expectations are potentially in tension: while the Lake City Aspern represents an 'exemplary model' of urban development, and is thus set for success, as a 'laboratory' the Lake City should enable experiments which may also fail. For the moment it remains unclear whether these contradictory plans are compatible with the expectations and needs of the residents.

Identity construction and housing conditions

With regard to the process of identity construction among the new residents, both the expectations and the process of settlement are decisive. As the survey results show, the attractiveness to live in a new district and the accessibility of green and open space had been important motivators for the majority of the new residents to move to the Lake City Aspern. The feeling of being part of something new and of being able to participate in the production of this new environment contribute to establishing a local identity. Respondents indicating that they have actively selected Lake City Aspern as a new residence express an above-average satisfaction and identification with the neighbourhood. The research results show a very high level of satisfaction with the Lake City Aspern. The positive relationship with the new urban environment is based on a positive evaluation of one's own apartment, but also on the ability to participate. Positive feelings are evoked by the green

environment, recreational facilities, bicycle-friendly infrastructure and the quality of social neighbourhood. More critically evaluated are aspects such as the lack of certain amenities (shops, restaurants, cultural and health facilities), the parking situation or public transport intervals. Continuous construction activities and associated noise are also seen as impairing the positive view of the new urban environment. However, these are only snapshots and it remains to be seen how the evaluation will develop and change with the progressive settlement over time. One of the key aspects of life satisfaction refers to the economic situation: for many new residents, moving to the Lake City Aspern increased their housing expenses, which for many were complemented by payments for construction costs. Residents with lower income are therefore more likely to be dissatisfied with their new living environment and to suffer economic stress. The potential for frustration is higher also among those residents who indicate that the choice to move to the Lake City Aspern was free and actively chosen to a limited degree only. As a result, deficiencies related to construction, design and equipment justify more the negative feelings and a more critical or even negative evaluation of the neighbourhood.

As described, the high housing satisfaction also refers to the social neighbourhood. However, this aspect also seems to polarize: for the majority of new residents, the quality of the social environment significantly contribute to their housing satisfaction; however, some residents assess the social neighbourhood more critically. This also reflects the fact that the population of the Lake City Aspern is composed of residents who are sharing different life situations and different lifestyles. This is also reflected in the co-existence of different types of housing and mobility preferences. Again, the research makes visible that the settlement process is not free of social contradictions or even fractures. What is indicated by the research is that the different wishes and opportunities of being involved in the co-production of the new neighbourhood constitute a source of social differentiation and potentially also of exclusion. It is important to see that the processes of identity formation and (symbolic) space production (including the design of gardens or balconies) may provoke not only social cohesion and local community building, but also social boundaries and distancing. Furthermore, the aspect of temporality has to be considered: what will happen when the image of the 'new' fades either due to the changing expectations of those who move in later (they will move into newly built houses, but in a socially and symbolically already defined urban environment), or due to the changing aspirations or needs in the life course of the pioneers? Observing these social processes and dynamics represents a core function of long-term settlement monitoring.