

Housing satisfaction in the context of security and housing

A post-occupancy evaluation using the example of the model character of the residential estate “die grüne welle“ in Gerasdorfer Straße, Wien 21

SUMMARY

INTRO

In 2010 the city of Vienna invited tenders for a developers' competition on the focal topic of housing security. Both during the design phase and for ongoing maintenance of the projects special emphasis was to be placed on this theme in spatial, structural, technical and social terms.

The competition referring to a section of the former OMV area in Gerasdorferstraße in Vienna's 21st district comprised five areas of study. Besides the safety topic, the tender for three of these five areas focussed on the “new settlers' movement“. This was also the case for area of study nr. 5, for which the project called “die grüne welle“ (WBV GÖD, firm of architects SUPERBLOCK, landscape planning consultants Land in Sicht, and wohnbund:consult) was recommended for implementation.

The central idea of the project - based on the typology of row houses - included an unpretentious settlement structure of curved lines that alternately approach and edge away, thus forming an open housing area with a variety of open spaces.

The safety arrangements worked out by the project team included various technical, but also spatial, structural and social measures. Quite deliberately, it was tried to differentiate the security topic from the predefined mode of thinking, to move away from the „gated community“ idea and instead bet on community living, neighbourhood and mutual responsibility. Security should not be the result of isolation but should be supported through openness and high visibility of semi-public areas and private garden spaces. Another focus was placed on the dog-friendly design of the facilities. This measure was justified by the fact that dogs are both an objective safety factor and a contribution to a subjective feeling of safety.

TASK AND STUDY DESIGN

The post-occupancy evaluation centres on housing satisfaction of residents of the model residential complex “die grüne welle“ with a focus on “housing security“ as formulated in the selection procedure for property developers in Gerasdorfer Straße. The analysis refers to topically relevant targets and to the innovative content of the project in the competition, to the implementation of specific measures, to the role of the guiding principle “housing security“ and first and foremost to the acceptance by and satisfaction of tenants.

The guiding research questions are:

- Which were the priorities in planning and implementing the project?
- Was the guiding theme “housing security“ implemented by the planners?
- How is overall housing satisfaction in these facilities rated?
- How do the inhabitants assess individual aspects of housing satisfaction?
- What about the subjective feeling of security in the residential estate and in the residential area?
- How are the planning measures taken received by the inhabitants?
- What about the acceptance of the planning priority „dog-friendliness“?

A **mix of** quantitative and qualitative **tools** was chosen for the post-occupancy evaluation in order to reach a certain width and depth in dealing with the topic.

An **document analysis** of the call for tenders and of the submission of projects marked the starting point for the topic and for the subsequent quantitative and qualitative interviews.

A **quantitative online poll** was to allow for the participation of a maximum of residents in the study in order to obtain a comprehensive overview of current occupant satisfaction in this residential estate.

Qualitative interviews with 12 residents were to support and provide an in-depth description of the results of the online survey. 7 interviews were conducted with participating planners from the fields of free-space planning and architecture and with external experts concerning the issues of planning and implementation of the project, about housing security and dogs.

RESULTS OF THE EVALUATION

Based on the focal topic “home security“, the residential construction project “die grüne welle“ developed into a residential complex of model character. Zoning allowed for a specific urban development approach that implied the theme of home security as a main pillar of consideration, by intensively discussing also social questions right from the beginning. The result is a project that guarantees security especially through openness, communality, good neighbourliness and a mix of uses and therefore can to a great extent refrain from area delimitation and technical security measures.

Besides housing satisfaction, the theme of “home security“ is especially in the focus of this study and the interpretation of the project determines that the latter cannot be separated from the aspects of good neighbourliness and dog-friendliness.

A high degree of housing satisfaction in “die grüne welle“

Housing satisfaction in the residential complex “die grüne welle“ is generally high. Over 80% of the people questioned state that their apartment meets their original expectations to a very high or high extent. 83% of participants in the survey are very satisfied or rather satisfied with their housing situation. Nearly 90% of respondents like living in their apartment and almost 70% would recommend the housing estate to friends of theirs.

A nuanced picture of individual aspects of the home...

Looking more closely at single aspects we find a more nuanced picture: the people interviewed are very satisfied with the brightness, size and number of rooms of their apartment/house. There is also satisfaction in terms of room layout and quietness in the flat/house. The level of satisfaction is however lower with regard to the quality of construction (especially concerning thermal and sound insulation).

The respondents are dissatisfied with heating expenditure and housing cost. The latter is mostly due to partly very high back payments for operating costs and energy bills approximately two weeks before the start of the interviews. Developers argue that these costs originate from additional expenditure during the moving-in phase (waste disposal, first purchases, additional heating cost due to residual humidity) as well as from underestimating running costs. For some residents these back payments constitute an undermining of the affordability of living in this residential estate. It may be assumed that the overall level of satisfaction was influenced negatively by these back payments.

The interviews also reflect the high level of satisfaction especially with the design and size of the flats/houses. Here too, dissatisfaction is voiced primarily with regard to back payments and to communication with the property management, concerning a lack of participation with respect to floor plans, special equipment and individual design options, above all the installation of solar protection.

...of the residential estate...

There is a high level of satisfaction concerning architecture and cleanliness/tidiness of the facilities. Comparatively many respondents abstained from answering the question on accessibility. Counting only the answers without taking into account the non-answers, there is a very high level of satisfaction of over 85%.

Only a little more than half the people interviewed are very or rather satisfied with the offer of free space. The interviews show that this refers particularly to furniture, to lack of opportunities for children to play and to the maintenance of green space during periods of dryness. At the same time it is above all the central square that is made intensive use of as a venue and for motor activities of children and this is greatly appreciated by residents. There is dissatisfaction with regard to play areas designed for children: the design of the children's playground (a gravelled area) is a main point of criticism and so is the lack of offers for kids and adolescents. There is also relatively high dissatisfaction about the house management, the reasons of which are mostly communication and organisational issues.

The offer of community infrastructure in the project (common room, guest apartment, service centre, community equipment) is generally well received and used by a majority of respondents.

...and of the residential environment

Concerning the residential environment, it is primarily air quality and child friendliness that are given a positive rating. A majority of respondents are also satisfied with public transport connections. Only a little more than half of the people interviewed are satisfied with shopping facilities, leisure time infrastructure and healthcare provision in their residential environment.

The high standing of the residential environment is judged (very) favourably.

Open design under guarantee of privacy has proved effective

The open design of the residential complex is a basic element of its concept. Communication, good neighbourliness, communality and mutual responsibility could be encouraged thanks to visibility, to the absence of non-transparent high enclosures and to the creation of a semi-public open space.

This requirement seems to be met in particular through intense neighbourly contacts and through a high degree of social control. At the same time, during project progression, an intense debate on the topic of privacy and of (semi-)public spheres turned out to be necessary and it became clear that safeguarding some privacy also means there has to be a certain extent of separation. In spite of that it is exactly the semi-public areas such as front gardens that make a significant contribution to developing neighbourly relationships and community.

Very intensive neighbourly contacts in the residential estate

In the whole residential complex, satisfaction is highest with regard to neighbourly relationships: nearly 85% of respondents indicated they found these very (46%) or rather (39%) satisfactory. This high satisfaction is reflected in the intensity of neighbourly contacts: almost 60% say they have a short chat with their neighbours every now and then and just as many say they exchange visits and engage in shared activities. This development is interesting particularly with respect to the attitudes before moving in: both with prospective residents and future residents neighbourliness played a comparatively marginal role before they moved in as well as in their former residential environment.

That speaks in favour of the community building elements of the project thanks to its particular spatial and structural design, and also thanks to the events organised in the context of the community building.

A differentiated perception of subjective feelings of protection and security

Nearly 85% of the participants consider their residential environment (very) safe during daytime. At night it is a clearly lower percentage of people that feel secure: 56%. The subjective sense of security is the lowest with regard to car theft/-burglary and residence burglary. A partly very marked difference can be found between inhabitants of flats and inhabitants of houses, this goes for all safety aspects. The occupants of houses feel clearly less secure than those of flats. These results have been confirmed by other studies. In the study "Life and quality of life in Vienna", safety expectations are also the lowest with regard to residential burglary and car burglary/-theft. Moreover, it becomes visible that people in sparsely developed areas on the north-eastern edge of Vienna feel the least secure in terms of residential burglary. The study "Residential security in Vienna" of the Austrian Chamber of Commerce also points to a striking difference between inhabitants of flats and those of houses. Interestingly, in the results of the online interviews of "die grüne welle" there is a discrepancy between the respondents' perceptions of security and the technical precautions taken in terms of protection against burglary. Compared with other inhabitants of (terraced)houses in Vienna, only few inhabitants of this residential complex took additional technical safety measures such as the installation of alarm systems.

In the qualitative interviews all respondents stated that they felt very secure and that additional technical measures were therefore unnecessary. Here again it is primarily neighbourly contacts and social control that are mentioned as essential "safety measures".

Project priority “dog friendliness“ very well received

The dog-friendly design of the residential estate resulted primarily from considerations about a suitable security concept. The presence and visibility of people in semi-public spaces should be increased especially through a focus on dogs and this should contribute to objective security as well as to a positive subjective perception of security within the complex. The local conditions of the neighbourhood, with direct access to the green belt and an extensive network of pathways also provided an ideal location for this concept.

Therefore it was essential to communicate at an early stage that dogs were explicitly welcome, so that people who were not dog owners were also fully aware of the consequences.

The project theme “dog-friendliness“ is viewed very positively by a majority of respondents. A quarter of the people interviewed stated they possessed one or several dogs, which is a very high density of dogs in comparison with the rest of the city area. More than two thirds of dog owners are satisfied with the offer for dogs in the complex. The offer of the dog area is assessed very positively and well frequented. In spite of the surrounding green space it is an important infrastructural supplement for the free movement of dogs.

Also, a majority of non-dog owners state they are fond of dogs. Any conflicts that may arise are mostly due to excrements and to people feeling disturbed by the barking of dogs. Dog owners do not mention any problems with non-dog owners, this suggests that the issue of „dog-friendliness“ was well communicated and sufficiently embedded in the project.

The theme of “dog-friendliness“ is considered a special asset in this project: it is very well received and, for some inhabitants, dog-friendliness was one of the reasons why they moved into this complex. Also with regard to housing security the focus on dogs can be assessed positively: more than a quarter of the survey sample felt more secure because of dogs living in the residential estate.

Dr. Raimund Gutmann und DI Mag. Margarete Huber
Wien, 07.09.2015

wohnbund:consult - Büro für Stadt.Raum.Entwicklung,
www.wohnbund.at