



## Lake City (Seestadt Aspern) Settlement Monitoring II

A study commissioned by the Municipal Department 50 (Housing Research)

**Project duration:** April – December 2019

### Research team and research cooperation:

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## Objectives and methodology of the research

Seestadt Aspern is one of the largest urban development projects in Europe. The project responds to the increasing demand for high quality and affordable housing in a context of urban growth but also to more general tendencies of urban restructuring in the context of late modernity and globalization. The Lake City development project reflects an exceptional example of a complex, long-term and integrated approach to urban planning, relating both to international debates about urban change and local traditions of urban development and housing; a particular focus lies on "new social housing" (social mix, social cohesion) and new approaches to transport/mobility and social participation. Being built on an brownfield area of around 240 hectares with 10,500 residential units for around 20,000 residents and a corresponding number of potential jobs, the new district in the north-east of Vienna poses numerous questions of high social and sociological relevance: To what extent do the concepts of housing, neighborhood and public space, developed in the planning process, correspond to the perspective of the people moving in? Who are the new residents, in demographic, economic and social terms? What expectations do they have with regard to their new living environment, the neighborhood? What social dynamics characterizes the neighborhood development, particularly with regard to socioeconomic and sociocultural aspects? Which social and spatial challenges arise in this context?

The "Lake City Settlement Monitoring" is designed as a multi-stage research project that accompanies the process of the city making from the angle of social sciences. The research started in 2015 with an extensive investigation in the context of the first settlement phase; different methodologies have been applied, such as participant observations, stakeholder interviews, socio-spatial analyses, and a questionnaire-based survey among the new residents. In 2017, the research continued by contrasting the Lake City, on the basis of complementary survey data, with other new urban development areas in Vienna. In 2019, a second phase of field work took place. The objective was to find out how people who moved to the new neighborhood at different times, perceive and evaluate the situation: Do the expectations and perceptions differ between the "pioneers", i.e. those who came in 2014/15, and the people who have recently moved in? Have the attitudes and orientations of first-arrivers changed since that time? Is the Seestadt a socially and socio-spatially homogeneous or a more strongly differentiated and fragmented neighborhood? Which positive or negative aspects can be identified having maybe an impact on the further development of the neighborhood?

In order to answer these questions, a web-based survey among the residents of the Seestadt was carried out, completed by social spatial observations, in-depth qualitative interviews, and four focus group discussions with stakeholders. The aim of the survey is to get to know the various needs, wishes, interests, perceptions, ideas and conceptions of the residents, of particular relevance in terms of issues such as housing satisfaction, social neighborhood and cohesion, public space and related questions of milieu-related differentiations. The qualitative surveys (focus groups) focus on questions of image building and the topic of city heat.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The residents' survey was carried out as an web-based survey; the survey period spanned the whole of September. During that period, two members of the research team were in the field to hand out questionnaires and to expand

## Summary of research results

### Over time, neighbourhood ties become stronger but also more nuanced

The results of the research reveal a differentiated picture: On the one hand, a majority of inhabitants prove to be very satisfied with their living situation and the local city life, and they also would recommend Seestadt as a place of residence to friends or acquaintances. On the other hand, as data indicate, assessments are cohort-dependent. In general, respondents who live in Seestadt since 2014/15, the so-called “pioneers”, evaluate the neighborhood's situation more often positive compared to those who only moved in after 2018; at the same time, assessments become more realistic, and sometimes also more ambivalent, and respondents stress some critical issues.

The fact that pioneers rate the quality of life and the neighborhood better than new residents could indicate a stronger identification and familiarity with the new neighborhood; at the same time this result reflects also a long-term selection effect. This is especially true for pioneers who had made a conscious decision to move to the lake city, and many of these first-settlers expressed from the very beginning a high interest in being actively involved in their new living environment. Not surprisingly, respondents belonging to the pioneer cohort feel more committed to the different aspects of neighborhood relationships, and to good neighborly behavior. They more often meet with other neighbors for joint activities and are more actively involved in neighborhood initiatives. While a clear majority of the pioneers very much appreciate living in Seestadt Aspern, a minority is critical and dissatisfied. This concerns particularly aspects that are difficult to adapt to, such as the distance to workplace etc.

Survey results indicate cohort related differences also in some other respects: The new residents arrive to a larger degree from rural areas outside Vienna, whereas pioneers mostly had lived before in the older Viennese housing stock. Newcomers also give other reasons for their decision to move in to Lake City: Important attractors are the size of the new apartment and its location on the outskirts, the green areas or the lake as a local recreation area; by contrast, pioneers mention family needs, a forthcoming birth, a bad housing situation, or the attractiveness of a newly built neighborhood. Different patterns also arise in relation to the entry points in getting an apartment. Whereas for a majority of the pioneers the apartment was allocated directly by the developer/landlord but also by the municipal housing agency, most newcomers got access through the developer/landlord or via the internet-based housing market. These differences reflect also a changing housing offer for the two cohorts: Whereas the first construction period produced mostly subsidized housing, most of the more recent constructions are private financed rental apartments and condominiums. Thus, the proportion of private financed rental apartments and condominiums is much higher among the new residents.

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the sample in a targeted manner using face-to-face interviews. That way, 522 participants took part in the survey, 343 fully completed questionnaires were available for evaluation. The questionnaire was filled out by more women than men, the age groups and educational groups are well distributed; autochthonous people participated more often than people with an immigrant history. Almost two thirds of the respondents moved in at the first stage of settlement, a good fifth settled recently.

## **Differentiation of social milieus**

The research results confirm a key finding of the initial survey in 2015: the milieu-specific differentiation of the population. By this is meant that the population settling in the Lake City neighbourhood, differ less in terms of class position but rather in relation to value-driven aspects of lifestyle. In other words: The Seestadt residents represent a sociostructurally relatively homogeneous, but heterogeneous population in socio-cultural terms. The research identifies differences along the axis materialism-post-materialism, particularly with regard to conceptions of housing, neighbourhood and urban life, but also in relation to aspects relevant to social inequality. An interesting aspect concern shifting priorities in housing values: When surveyed for the first time, almost half of the respondents stated that the apartment was primarily a family centered place; four years later, almost two thirds of the respondents say so. On the other hand, members of the newly arrived cohort share more often housing values driven by ideas of tidiness, private withdrawal and intimacy. For many of them the apartment represent a place "where things are in good order and clean". At the same time, housing includes more often to conceptions of work place or of a place to exercise private hobbies.

An interesting and important indicator concerning milieu differentiation refer to concepts of urban life. The data draw a polarized picture: on the one hand, the results show positively connoted images of the neighborhood as an urban village, or as an open and lively city; on the other hand rather negatively associated images of the neighborhood as closed city, or even as ghost city occur. While the notion of urban village, the dominant concept particularly among the newly arrived citizens, contains many positive associations, there is also social isolation or even loneliness; this experience is mainly pronounced by people living in single person households.

## **Affordability of housing and city heat as critical determinants of housing satisfaction**

The research results point to the significance of social inequality related issues. The data clearly show that ideas of an open and lively city (which is in accordance to the official planning model) correspond with an availability of economic and cultural capital. In contrast, residents with less cultural capital, low income and burdening housing costs are more likely to share images of a closed city. Multivariate analyzes underline the key role of housing costs: a critical assessment of housing costs is - along with suffering from city heat - the most important determinant for low housing and life satisfaction. The analysis prove the significant impact of price per square meter on housing satisfaction: With every additional euro per square meter, the likelihood to dissatisfaction increases. On the other hand, many aspects of living are reported positively: This particularly refers to the quality of the apartment, the feeling of security (in and outside the living space), the green and recreation areas, the educational infrastructure (kindergartens and schools); there is also rather positive feedback regarding ongoing construction activities. Distance to the workplace, architecture and design of the residential buildings and the general reputation of the neighborhood are perceived with more ambivalence. Better shopping opportunities, a more efficient connectivity with public transport, more places in schools and kindergartens, a larger offer of restaurants and coffee houses, shadow places with planted trees, but also new solutions for (individual) mobility are some of the numerous wishes of the respondents with regard to the future development of the

neighborhood. However, the key concerns of the residents are city heat, affordability of housing and more outreaching, low-threshold forms of social participation.

When it comes to the subject of city heat, a majority of survey respondents state to suffer from extreme concentration of heat both in and outside the apartment during the summer season. The heat burden is largely independent of socio-demographic and economic variables, but varies according to the construction site and has an overall negative impact on housing satisfaction. Concerning the issue of housing costs, almost half of the respondents assess the housing costs as inappropriately high. This is particularly true for households reporting housing costs above the threshold of 30% of net household income. Households with low incomes, but also newcomers who are charged with many extra expenses are particularly concerned. As in the first survey in 2015, socioeconomic differentiation is again evident: Seestadt is home not only for wealthy people with higher cultural capital but also for less wealthy people who can hardly afford their housing expenses. A long-lasting burden due to high housing costs has negative effects on housing satisfaction, which in turn affects life satisfaction.

Finally, the research results also reveal the topic of social participation as relevant: On the one hand, the results confirm that in new development areas such as Seestadt Aspern social media play a key role in mobilizing and organizing local participatory practices; facilities such as community gardens or collective spaces which are open for all play also an important role. On the other hand, participatory and community-based activities are less well received among members of the later cohorts of residents. Participation seems to be a domain of first-comers and of more privileged groups (including most activists in collective housing). Residents who more recently moved in show in general less interest in community activities and other forms of neighborly integration. In the context of a focus group discussion it became obvious that social withdrawal, more common among the recent cohorts of residents, is related to the feeling of not being welcomed and no being heard; especially information and communication policy is perceived as confusing and inaccessible.

### **Dynamics of image building between control and appropriation**

One of the insights of the qualitative surveys is, however, that community building goes hand in hand with strategies of boundary-making and othering (targeting people from outside, young people etc.). At the same time, the Seestadt is in the core of the acting of various political, economic, administrative or community-oriented stakeholders which make a significant contribution to the production of (often idealized, marketing-driven) images of the neighborhood. These images can easily contradict the perceived and experienced reality of the residents. This topic is of significant importance insofar as in the context of city making the production of images (renderings) constitutes a specific and strategically used (marketing) instrument which easily gets in tension with the everyday representations and subjective meanings of the residents. From the perspective of the qualitative surveys, the urban experience requires the capacity to deal with heterogeneity, and to tolerate the urban space as a conflict zone full of contradictions and polyphonic voices.

## Conclusions

The research results confirm and differentiate many findings of the initial survey in 2015, in particular with regard to the social and cultural composition of the population, the process of milieu-differentiation, the relevance of social inequality related issues etc.; the data also reveal new topics such as the problem of city heat during the summer period. At the same time, the research stresses the dynamic role of local actors such as building groups, local companies, community-oriented institutions such as district management, youth work and health promotion or the numerous research initiatives carrying out studies and labs in Lake City. Precisely because the Seestadt is such a highly professionally planned new city, residents should be recognized in their heterogeneity, and as co-producers of the new neighborhood. The settlement monitoring helps to make visible the diverse and fluid perceptions, expectations and concerns of the people.

The survey results emphasize that housing costs and burdens caused by city heat are to be taken particularly seriously as fields of action. In terms of housing costs, the economic impact on low-income households is related to the processes of social differentiation, triggered by each new phase of settlement. The social dynamic of a neighborhood in the making cannot be completely controlled; complexity but also by a certain degree of disorder are essential characteristics of urbanity. The settlement monitoring gives evidence of an increasing social dynamic, areas of tensions are arising, for instance between social control and anonymity, the use of the lake by different groups and the associated topics of security and cleanliness, the contradictory relationship between representations of urbanity and village life, the desire for liveliness and the fear of losing control. Seestadt Aspern continues to act as a laboratory for social innovation, and this refers in particular to the still fluid and also vulnerable structure of the social fabric: With each new cohort of residents the development may take an unexpected turn.

A topic of increasing relevance in the upcoming years concerns Seestadt as a living environment for children and adolescents. There will be growing demand for facilities for young people; on the other hand, and maybe even more important, an open-minded, reflective and diversity-competent posture is needed, able to understand and to support young people's struggle for social recognition. The creation of strong local networking structures is an important tool for protecting the neighborhood from social disintegration and anomy in the long term.

A main task in near future is to find answers to the challenges of the climate crisis. Like many new development areas, Seestadt Aspern is particularly exposed to the effects of climate change. However, measures of climate adaptation and mitigation in housing are only successful and sustainable if they take into account both technical as well as social and socio-cultural aspects. Based on the results of the settlement monitoring there are good reasons to argue that the local population is willing and ready to be engaged in co-producing solutions!