

Quality Standards of Social Housing

I have occupied myself with urban development and then mainly with housing. I would like to give you a brief survey of Viennese Housing of the last few years and point out some in my opinion alarming development tendencies on the basis of some perceptions (including some of my own projects)

What are the main attributes of high quality housing?

- * Bright, sun-drenched spaces
- * Private open spaces
- * Peace and quiet (noise has become the number one disturbing factor)
- * Versatile outdoor spaces
- * Residential zones free of noise, commotion, and disturbances
- * Pedestrian and bicycle access ways
- * Bodies of water
- * High degree of vegetation
- * Even though it might sound fashionable to mention cost-effective housing as the foremost issue, this challenge has come to the fore all too often in public and political discussions. Housing costs, no doubt an important subject, has truly distracted from other aspects of high quality housing.

There is vast agreement on the above mentioned qualities and attributes. However, opinions vary when it comes to "how do we obtain these attributes".

More than 80% of the population, not only in Austria, perceives one-family house as the optimal residential building type to be aspired. Contra's are: land consumption would be too high, it is not applicable in big cities, supply network and waste management would be even more expensive than it already is...

On the other hand, it is a fact that current urban development is pursuing a diametrically opposed approach. Even though the residential quarters of the "Gründerzeit" (1870-1900) were often criticized for their density, better part of new urban development areas of the last years were built in an even denser way. Buildings are 4 to 8 floors high, excluding skyscrapers as "landmarks".

It was possible to attract a certain amount of attention by means of relevant projects; marketing and advertisement policies were developed to perfection; so much that some projects in densely built areas were presented as housing with "one-family house qualities". The gap between reality and advertisement became even wider. Some people conceive this kind of exaggerated presentation as pure cynicism. On the other hand, the city refines itself by means of high property values. Urban expansion areas are usually bought by "property allocating funds", designated accordingly, and sold to real estate developers.

If the "Market" keeps producing without regard for consumers' needs, the pressure on suburban areas will keep growing, the downward spiral of diminishing quality of life due to accumulation of traffic with all its side effects will accelerate.

People are running away from cities in shorter intervals. Empty "social housing" buildings are becoming commonplace- so that in the long term, reparation of the city will become a serious issue.

Under these circumstances, our common goal can only be to drastically raise the quality of life in urban areas, most of which are residential developments.

Thesis 1: Ideal residential building type:

As the building density increases, well-being of the residents decreases indirectly proportionally. Transforming the "one-family house" building type into urban structures which maintain the typical share of open green space while improving private open spaces (retreat spaces) meets the "ideal residential building type" requirements of most of the population to a great extent. The floor space index of such an urban area lies between 0.6 and 1 (floor space index = gross floor area/area of building site). This thesis is fortified by "human-ecological indices" of such areas (fluctuation, traffic, and health - see technical literature on the subject)

Thesis 2: Garden town with pedestrian access:

The rate of bicyclists and pedestrians are significantly higher in cities with a well developed pedestrian and bicycle way network. Accordingly, the rate of individual traffic is much lower. As a result, noise exposure within the city declines.

Thesis 3: City along a river:

Every child tries to get a chance to play with water. It is fascinating to watch children, one could learn so much from them, even about us grown-ups. Bodies of water have been gradually suppressed from our cities during the last 300 years because of the natural dangers of streams and rivers. Vienna has played a leading role in this, proud of her accomplishments for many years. Flood control was the ultimate objective. An integral solution, which would lead to a sustainable housing form, begins with the search for lost bodies of water. We need waterside promenades with trees, sheltered from the wind.

Thesis 4: Democratic solution process - or: Residents are not dumb:

Until now, urban planning was developed in an undemocratic fashion with a centralistic mentality. Media reports have followed this mentality; it is not expected of the regular citizen to point out or discuss various urban scenarios. Essential issues of our culture such as questions concerning our living space; the city, mobility, and traffic, as well as public welfare versus individual convenience have to be protruded. Appropriate instruments have to be found in order to cultivate a democratic development process which complies with population's will.

Pushing "Advertisement for city and housing" to perfection in the name of "shaping the public opinion" leads us in the wrong direction. It is possible to contain "escape from the city" and "endless" accumulation of traffic if the objective of maximizing the quality of life in the city is pursued sincerely.

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