Design Solutions as a Factor Promoting Well-being in the Courtyards of Riga’s Housing Estates

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Year One

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Housing estates are home to a large part of residents of Riga, yet their environment does not provide adequate conditions for high-quality living. So far the urban development mostly focused on the city centre as a representative image of Riga, therefore there is a stark contrast between the city centre and the suburbs. As inner courtyards and recreational areas lack improvement elements making them contemporary and safe, residents avoid spending their time there. As a result, people fail to establish a sense of belonging to the place they live and are unable to build a community. Neighbours often do not communicate with one another, people actually do not know their neighbours, they cannot come to an agreement, there is no mutual cooperation and trust. Without interaction, a sense of community does not form. To solve the problem, people should be given a chance to meet one another.

Seeing the potential of design as a tool for organising, facilitating and developing human behaviour and habits in the public space, the concept of the possible solutions suggests creating appealing places for meetings in the courtyards of Riga’s housing estates, which would facilitate communication, interaction and interest in one another among the residents, thus strengthening their sense of belonging to the community. A well-arranged public open space can function as a place of meeting for residents in the courtyards of the housing estates, not only satisfying the physical needs of every person but also enabling people to connect via rituals of everyday communication. An appealing and improved environment in the courtyards of Riga’s housing estates would be a platform that would gradually promote intermingling of local residents and their communication, as a result of which, a sense of belonging to the neighbourhood would emerge.

The target audience of the study encompasses a wide variety of residents living in Riga’s housing estates, who have different interests and needs. The public space is specific as it needs to be suitable for all, i.e. it has to comply with the principles of universal design. The target audience can be divided into the following sub-groups:

- children;
- young people (13-21 years old);
- adults;
- elderly people;
- persons with special needs.
In general, currently the situation in the courtyards of housing estates and in the public space often meets the needs of some sub-groups of the target audience, most often these of the first three groups. However, residential areas with multi-storey buildings are home to all of these groups, and in reality, the improvements to the public space are achieved using standard solutions that do not facilitate integration of various social groups. Designer’ task is to change the view about the courtyards of Riga’s housing estates and, by means of design solutions, to create an environment that would be physically and emotionally accessible to all residents.

It is important to come up with new solutions for improvement that would enhance residents’ sense of belonging and would also serve as an indicator of well-being. Today we still commonly see well-being as an individual’s ability to consume products and services. This model focuses on things that can be bought, thus on a temporary satisfaction of individual’s whims. The rest that falls outside this category is of secondary importance, i.e. water, air, local communities, residents’ solidarity, scenery, public urban space and a sense of security. These things are seen as public benefit, i.e. suitable for all, yet for no one in particular. As public benefit does not imply satisfaction of individual’s whims, it does not seem important. And here a contradiction arises because it is the quality of physical and social environment where people live and where the products and services they consume acquire their significance that forms the basis of a place of living. Because of this ignorance, the notion of public benefit has been degraded and commercialised, e.g. a shopping centre is built instead of improvements to a park or a sports ground; private security companies replace the neighbourhood watch, etc. The craving to consume various goods and services is in fact a mechanism compensating for the insufficiency of public benefit. People have to buy bottled drinking water because the available water is polluted; house alarm systems have to be installed because there are no neighbours who would keep an eye on the house while its owners are away travelling; people travel to see beautiful landscapes because local scenery has been ruined, etc. People are trying to fill the gaps left open by the missing public benefit, and they are becoming more insatiable and greedier, with is a persistent need to entertain and be entertained.

The main question of the study

Will making the environment appealing in the courtyards of Riga’s housing estates by means of design solutions facilitate intermingling and communication of
local residents which would lead to emergence of a sense of belonging to the neighbourhood?