RENEWAL OF LARGE SCALE HOUSING ESTATES – STUDIES OF OPEN SPACE QUALITY AND USAGE
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Abstract.
Large-scale residential areas with 5–12 storey high apartment blocks constitute about 40% of the entire housing in Riga. They have been built approximately from the late 1950s until the early 1990s of the 20th century. Majority of these houses and courtyards need reconstruction because of poor technical condition of buildings and low quality of open space. The goals for increasing standards of living space can be reached only by developing an appropriate set of tools ensuring implementations of complex projects. There are several ranges of issues to be solved: spatial, legal, management, financial and social ones. Common problems characteristic for majority of post-war housing estates:

- Disagreement of the land plot structure with the location of buildings;
- Infill construction in the courtyards disarranging the original urban structure;
- Access problems to the houses;
- Trends of social segregation and separation;
- Deterioration of the outdoor furniture and greenery;
- Poor technical condition and energy performance of buildings.

In last years renovation of existing large scale housing estates has become a high urban development priority for Riga City council, and in 2013 a pilot project for an area in Purvciems Neighbourhood has been started (the Riga City Architect Office, “Grupa93” Ltd). At present the first phase of the project is under way. In the ongoing stage spatial and architectural auditing of the area and buildings has to be made. It includes survey of outdoor space and overview of technical conditions of apartment buildings. It is not the first initiative dealing with urban renewal of post – war housing blocks in recent years. Several investigations have been made, e.g., “Feasibility Study for Quality Improvement of Riga Post – War Housing Estates (“Edgara Bērziņa birojs”, Ltd, 2011), The Sustainable Development Concept of Jugla Neighbourhood (“Grupa93” Ltd, 2010), Concept of Pilot Project for Renovation of Multi-storey Housing Blocks” (“Baltic Consulting” Ltd, 2013).

Also scientists and students of Higher Education Establishments have analysed challenges of renovation of so-called Microrayons. The study performed by The Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning, Riga Technical University has been made for the very housing block the ongoing pilot project run by The Riga City Architect Office is being held (authors: S. Treija, U. Bratuškins, E. Bondars, A. Jēka, B. Zvīgule). In the Autumn of 2008, as part of the project “Usage Intensity of Inner Courtyards in Purvciems – a Large-scale Housing Estate in Riga” in order to find out public opinion about the importance and role of public open spaces in the assessment of the quality of life in large-scale housing estates, a public survey has been held. The study area: quarter bordering on Unijas, Stirnu, Dzelzavas and Vaidavas Streets. Two different courtyards were selected as case studies of the research: one of the courtyards had retained its original Soviet time built-up structure, while the spatial structure of the other one was supplemented with a new infill building.

Research question: Do public open spaces originally planned as an important component of the large-scale housing estates containing spatial, social and environmental functions, now, in 50 years, still remain of the same importance and quality of the living space within the up-to-date standards of environment quality.

Method 1: public survey. A quantitative direct (face-to-face) method of interviewing was used in the survey, focusing on several objectives:

1. General assessment of spatial quality in large-scale housing estates.
2. Determination of level of satisfaction of the residents of large-scale housing estates with different aspects of the living environment.
3. Ascertaining the role of public open spaces in establishing and maintenance of social contacts among inhabitants.

As many as 246 people residing in the northern part of Purvciems were questioned.
Method 2: Inventory of activities. Along with the data of population survey, the inner courtyards of large-scale housing estates were also analysed. In 2009, the study was performed to find out the type and intensity of utilisation of inner courtyards: Pedestrian flow in the territory; usage intensity of the recreational function of the courtyard; household activity and cleaning of the territory.

Conclusion

Overall, the inventory data regarding the existing situation in the living environment corresponded to the negative evaluation of the improvement level in the courtyard, lack of benches and bad condition of playgrounds produced by population survey. Although public open spaces are treated as an important element of the living space, their real usage considerably differs from the intended one. The situation has not changed much since the study had been made. The spatial an architectural audit being performed as the first phase of the Riga City Pilot project shows that that the main changes are caused by later infill construction in the courtyards which has fragmented even more the original structure. As for the quality of open areas in most cases there are no considerable improvements made since. The yards are not regularly tended and renewed; and the most usual usage of them is parking places. The reasons are associated with social as well as economic and land property aspects, therefore to implement complex renewal projects radical development of different tools – planning, financing, administration, legal, etc., is needed.

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