Bringing mass housing estates back to life by using sustainable urban design strategies

Jomantė Valiulytė
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Summary

Today, every country, which was in the former Soviet Union, are facing ample issues on dealing with mass housing districts, which cover a great part of cities. Most of them are in a critical condition and in necessary need of renovation. Nevertheless, they are strongly criticized by researchers, as uncomfortable places to live, which do not fit the human scale. Riga, which is the capital of Latvia, is a special case. While in the past, serving as a western hub for the former USSR, today is an independent city, located in a democratic country. Though Riga is rich with Art Noveaux architecture (included in the UNESCO world heritage list), the biggest part of a city is mostly covered with mass housing estates. These estates portray monotonic and dull architecture and over-scaled public spaces, which is far from an attractive and comfortable environment. Mežciems is one of them. Once been soviet ’microrayon’, today Mežciems is a challenging place for sustainable urban transformation. Sustainable transformation of ‘microrayons’ sounds like a promising future because a sustainable development is based on creating comfortable zones for humans, practicing the use of renewable resources and developing a nature friendly environment. Nevertheless sustainability itself is focused on the future, not only on the present.

In this project the case of Mežciems is investigated. Mežciems was chosen because of its unique location and surroundings. Crucial was it to find appropriate approaches of sustainability which could be implemented in Mežciems ‘microrayon’. The main focus has been to use the most economic and efficient way to give Riga the face it deserves. The aim of the strategies was to preserve the buildings, while at the same time uplifting the potentials of microrayons. For this purpose five approaches were proposed, the ones which extend the life of Mežciems, preserve the history and improve urban structure of the whole city. Those approaches are: to improve the connection of Mežciems with the city center; to use mixed use infill; to create new and encourage the existing forms of entrepreneurship; to transform public spaces in such a way, that they would become lively and attractive; to distribute various functions within a walking distance. Some of the problems solved by these strategies include monotonic architecture, over scaled public spaces, unorganized parking etc. This ends by proposing a new design which if implemented, would transform Riga into an attractive and sustainable city. These strategies also have the potentials to transform other areas plagued by the problems associated with mass housing estates.

Using the strategies mentioned above Mežciems is used in this project as a case study to demonstrate a possible transformation of mass housing estates in Riga. The proposed design for the transformation of Mežciems solves most of these problems, with main focus on the economic aspects. This included introduction of new buildings, creation of new bicycle tracks, implementation of traffic calming system in high speed roads, reorganization of public spaces etc. A further recommendation would be to implement these strategies on other microrayons of Riga in order to give a complete face of transformation.
The existing situation of public spaces

After the implementation of human scale principles

Mixture of functions within a walking distance