

# Large Panel Housing Estates in Riga: A Challenging Space

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## **Introduction**

This paper deals with issues of large-scale housing districts in Riga, the capital city of Latvia. It argues that the improvement of the large-scale panel housing districts is of great importance, since they have a disproportionately high share of the residential environment. The analysis starts with a brief description of the housing districts in Riga City and then provides an overview of changes and problems that have arisen in the housing sector in 1990s -- the land reform, privatisation of the state and municipal housing stock, and development of the housing market.

The paper analyses the national and local policy documents which contain guidelines for rehabilitation of the environment (using engineering approaches), not revitalisation (meaning social improvements). It argues that a complex approach is needed, appropriately optimising all the integrated components of the environment to design strategies and programs for improvement and management of the large-scale housing districts. The paper shows that currently, people are not ready to accept the transfer of responsibilities; therefore, cultivating changes in public attitude and motivating people to act is a question of great importance in the housing sector right now.

## **The Impact of Housing Transition**

The residential space in Riga City is currently undergoing a transition process with regards to the problems concerning both the population in general and local communities within their specific environment. Though residential problems are not the most urgent ones, they should be taken into consideration when assessing the public quality of life.

What is typical for the residential environment in Riga City now and how does it reflect changes in national politics, economy and society? While the centre undergoes restoration and development, the suburban areas are just waiting in expectation of changes. How does one make these areas attractive for living, working and recreation? This is a frequently asked question which elicits

the usual answer: they demand humanisation. This answer explains everything and nothing at the same time. The question it raises, which is much more difficult to answer, is how to implement it? The latter question still remains to be addressed in city-wide and national planning policies.

After the restoration of the independence of Latvia, the public felt enthusiastic, and the position towards the large-scale panel housing environment was quite stringent: these areas should be gradually phased out since they cause people to feel alienated, encourage vandalism, do not comply with the conventional ways of housing etc. Statements of this kind were quite popular, offering no real and acceptable alternatives. The need to improve the large-scale panel housing environment is set forth by the life itself; the issue of the large-scale panel housing areas is not as simple as it seems. It is not only a question of physical improvement, but also a question of social integration, because these are places constituting constraints and opportunities for a wide range of social relationships. However, thus far, no ways to do so in order to achieve real gains are defined, at least not in Latvia.

### **Characteristics of Large-Scale Panel Housing Districts in Riga**

Both features of past development and recent Soviet era planning are abundantly present in the contemporary residential environment of Riga. The housing districts in the suburbs can be seen as the most significant manifestation of Soviet housing policies. Large-scale panel housing – a typical imprint of this time -- has changed Riga's urban environment significantly; at the same time influencing people's attitude towards housing in general.

The large-scale panel housing districts are a calling card of the Riga City too, because the physical structures and units (buildings, their layout, yards, greenery and other indicators), usually come to mind first when thinking about the residential environment. The housing stock of Riga City amounts to 16.2 million m<sup>2</sup> with approximately 40% being large-scale panel housing (Statistical Office of the Republic of Latvia; 1999). The population of Riga City in 1999 was 796,000 and 60% resided in large-scale panel housing districts.

Riga City's large-scale panel housing areas are diverse (Table 1). Some of them are large in terms of territory and population, for example, Imanta, Plavnieki, Purvciems with roughly 60,000 inhabitants each. Other districts are considerably smaller, for example Bolderaja. Some areas are distinct, with a high population density, for example Kengarags with 213 inhabitants/ha and Mezciems with 220 inhabitants/ha, while other districts have a lower population density.

**Table 1**                      **Characteristics of Riga City Large Scale Panel Housing Districts**

<b>Name of district</b>	<b>Year of construction</b>	<b>Number of inhabitants (thousands)</b>	<b>Population density (inhabitants/ha)</b>
Agenskalns	1958-1962	25	109
Sarkandaugava	1960-1975	22	174
Jugla	1961-1970	35	160
Kengarags	1961-1971	60	213
Imanta	1965-1975	60	157
Purvciems	1965-1975	65	201
Bolderaja	1965-1975	15	116
Ilguciems	1965-1970	37	157
Vecmilgravis	1968-1980	39	176
Mezciems	1977-1985	20	220
Plavnieki	1985-1990	60	200
Zolitude	1985-1990	25	109
Ziepniekkalns	1990-	22	125
	<b>Total:</b>	<b>485</b>	<b>163</b>

*Source:* Riga City Official Plan. 1995 – 2005. Riga. 1996.

Most of the large scale panel housing areas were built from the 1960s to the late 1980s and are located in the suburbs. Depending on the time of construction, the districts are also different in terms of building composition. These areas play an ambiguous role today, being crucial to how the mental image of contemporary Riga is established, or rather sustained. The basic function of all completed large-scale panel housing districts is just housing itself with very little employment.

Large-scale panel housing districts were built mainly to meet the increasing demand for housing which came along with the increasing population, mostly due to immigration from the other Soviet Republics. Thus, currently about 60-85% of the population in these districts are non-Latvians (while their share of the total population of Riga was 64% in 1999). The situation has changed slightly during recent years; however no essential changes in national composition have occurred.

Large scale panel housing areas are found in many countries: the Baltics, Sweden, Finland, Germany, etc., and researchers characterise them in a similar way: monotonous, with standardised living conditions, less attractive, difficult to manage. The difference in the districts in Riga City compared to such of other East and Central European cities is their immense scale and the high percentage of the total population residing there. To summarise, three aspects of the low quality of large scale panel housing should be assessed: the poor physical condition of the buildings and environment, management problems, and the public attitude to this environment.

The following “negative portrait” of the large scale panel housing can be constructed:

- The large-scale panel housing districts are massive and with low environmental quality, both physically and socially.
- The buildings are in poor condition, many buildings have poor insulation, and walls are often cracked.
- Heating systems are inefficient.
- Public service and recreation facilities are poorly developed in these areas.
- Outdoor space is not properly arranged and maintained; roads, paths and yards are in poor repair, lawns are of low quality, equipment (benches, playgrounds) is worn or broken.
- The lack of interest by institutions to deal with these housing problems.
- The negligent attitude and irresponsibility of residents for the state of the buildings and their environment. Lack of feeling of community.

It would be incorrect to avoid mentioning that the large scale panel housing districts are places in the city where people live willingly. A survey carried out in Mezciems housing district<sup>1</sup> showed that only 42 % of respondents were willing to live in the districts<sup>2</sup> (Marana, 1999). No doubt this depends on many factors of which the most important are the advantages of this district in comparison with others – comfortable commute to Riga City centre, attractive natural landscape (forest and lake), quietness, good ambient air, etc.

### **Housing Problems in the 1990's**

Nation-wide political, economic and social changes have also influenced the large-scale panel housing areas in Riga City and people living there. The major changes are associated with land reform, privatisation of state and municipal housing stock, and the development of the housing market.

#### *Privatisation of the State and Municipal Housing Stock*

Privatisation of the state and municipal housing stock was launched in 1995. Currently tenure in the large-scale housing tenure is changing as well. On

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<sup>1</sup> Mezciems large-scale panel housing district was built in 1976-1988, and lies 8 km from the Riga City centre. The district covers 98 hectares and consists of 5 and 9 storey buildings of reinforced concrete modules, as well as a few 16 storey buildings. There are 5,726 apartments with 15,000 tenants in the district.

<sup>2</sup> The survey of Mezciems's population was performed in May and June, 1999. It explored the actual problems concerning housing and people's views on the technical, social, management and other housing issues.

September 1, 1999, 61% of the state and municipal apartments were privatised nationwide, and 54% were privatised in Riga. Both nationally and in Riga City the number of apartments and buildings in various stages of the privatisation cycle increasingly grows. Despite this progress, there are still many unsolved issues concerning both apartment privatisation itself and the legal procedures.

Although people's awareness of the need to privatise their apartments has grown, privatisation is a problem for some of the tenants of panel housing. These people have not been able to privatise their apartments or experience difficulties in doing so, due to lack of sufficient number of privatization certificates.<sup>3</sup> Other problems are associated with arranging the maintenance and development of common spaces and facilities, which is expected to become the owners' responsibility soon. The information is short on what will happen after the privatisation, as well as how residents will be able to manage their dwelling if the financial burden is imposed on them. At the same time, the understanding of responsibilities and duties when implementing the new management system is insufficient not just among the new owners but also at the institutional level -- municipal and national.

### *Rent Reform*

Before 1991, the State subsidised rental payments for apartments. However, they covered the maintenance expenses insufficiently. Therefore, a great deal of the housing stock, including the large-scale housing, is now in poor condition. The range of rent payments from 7.5 to 15 santims/m<sup>2</sup> was established by the Law on Rental of Residential Space in 1993. Rents are regulated for Riga City (in state and municipal housing) at 14.8 santims/m<sup>2</sup>.<sup>4</sup> However, this amount is just sufficient for paying for maintenance expenses. There are no resources left for improvement and development.

In addition, a portion of the residents are unable to pay their rent and communal services. Households with small children and those with 3 and more children, as well as pensioners experience the most difficulties. The situation for households that occupy apartments unaffordable for their resources is quite complicated. These households usually consist of 1 to 2 members, mostly pensioners, occupying apartments with 1 or 2 rooms and a full range of utilities. In many cases they have financial problems and cannot pay for rent and communal services, particularly during the heating season. Some data provided by the Riga City municipality show that a part of the population moves to

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<sup>3</sup> Often people on low income will sell their privatization vouchers to buy food, pay off rental debts, or communal services.

<sup>4</sup> 1 USD = 0.58 LVL

smaller apartments without utilities, thus lowering their living standard due to their inability to pay for rent and communal services (Riga City Communal Department, 1999). Although approximately 35,000 households or 9.2% of the population of Riga City received social support from Riga City Council in 1999, 81% of this support was allocated for paying rent and communal services; it did not cover all the demands of the people in need of such support. All the above mentioned changes have caused problems not only for residents of large-scale panel housing districts, but also for the society in general. These problems exist everywhere, but there are some specific features concerning tenants of the large-scale panel housing districts.

### *Development of the Apartment Market*

The data of one of the major real estate companies in Riga “Latio” shows that large-scale panel housing accounts for 90% of deals with apartments in the real estate market (Tsenkova, 2000). Demand for such apartments depends on the location, as well as design and when the building was constructed. One of the more interesting trends in the large-scale panel housing districts is the increasing demand for the lower floors, which can be reconstructed to adapt for business needs. There are no buildings originally designed for such purpose. Thus, business people willingly reconstruct them for offices, shops, communal services, dentists’ services and like. Rooms are demanded close to the appropriate infrastructure, at a main road, bus stop, retail centre, etc.

Nowadays, all residential areas are inhabited by a mix of residents with different levels of income, social status, and nationality. There is no segregation into upper class, middle class and poor residential districts. However, some trends emerge. Residents with higher income purchasing an apartment in a large-scale panel housing area prefer to buy an apartment in one that is considered more prestigious. Following the development of the housing market, the mobility of population grows, thus causing, though slowly, the increasing trend towards segregation in these districts.

### **Policy and Practice**

Currently, two documents outlining the issue of arranging the large-scale housing environment are already approved by City Council. The Riga Official Plan generally outlines the issues of arranging the large-scale housing environment (Riga City, 1996). The policy document states that improvements should proceed through:

- Improving the physical, technical and social quality of buildings and districts;
- Developing the servicing infrastructure within the districts;

- Applying new construction solutions for improved energy efficiency;
- Arranging and developing the recreation and green areas;
- Making the outdoor spaces around the buildings more attractive.

Although this document was adopted in 1995, no actual measures have been taken to humanise the large-scale panel housing districts so far. However, it is important that policies in Riga Official Plan also cover such issues as involvement of residents and co-operatives of apartment owners in the improvement of the large-scale housing districts, as well as the need to carry out research on residents' desires, needs and affordability constraints. The policies envision public involvement through:

- Information on the decisions related to housing issues and consultation;
- Support for the creation of unions of residents (private owners, co-operatives, etc.) and their initiative in management, maintenance and improvement of the residential stock.

The *National Report to the Habitat II Conference* dealt with the issue of rehabilitation of large-scale housing districts built in 1960s – 1980s (Ministry of Environment and Regional Development, 1996). The idea of public involvement is somewhat integrated into this document. However, support for such initiatives actually has not happened. Currently, the Housing Development and Management Policy Document for Riga City is under development. It deals with the issues of the improvement of the physical environment, but attention to questions related to public involvement is limited. The document contains mostly guidelines for the rehabilitation of the environment (using engineering approaches), not revitalisation (meaning social improvements). Ideas about involvement of people in arranging their housing environment in some way are formulated at the policy level, but there is lack of concrete activities for implementation of these policies.

It should be noted that solutions to a few technical problems and the visual improvement of the landscape are not guarantees that the environment will become most suited to residents' needs and aspirations. Measures need to improve the overall standard and level of comfort in the area within the constraints of the limited financial resources. If not, the resources can turn out to be used inefficiently, failing to solve the main problems. If the environment still fails to fulfil its social function and resources are wasted, the quality of the environment will be eroded again. The problem will be just transferred to the future, postponing the solution, since the actual causes rooted in the mutual influences of physical, human and management factors will not be addressed properly.

Therefore, a complex approach towards the management and improvement of large-scale housing districts is needed -- one that builds on the

strengths of integration of technical, social, economic and organizational approaches and integrates them into rehabilitation strategies and programs.

The active interaction between the people and the environment concerns both physical proceedings (establishing and changing), and symbolic proceeding (defining it in accordance with the public ideas and interpreting in accordance with this meaning). Thus, people should get integrated into the housing environment not only because of the physiological requirements (the roof overhead), but also as an organic functional component able to create its own interaction with other elements of the environment meeting all the needs (biological, social and mental) of its inhabitants. At the same time, the housing environment should raise the quality of life, providing for various activities of different groups of community.

### **Are People Ready to Improve Their Living Environment?**

To make this question clearer, let us use survey data merely as an illustration of the actual situation (Marana, 1999). The survey contains, *inter alia*, questions about people's willingness to get involved in arranging and maintaining of their environment and places of common use.

Do people know what is going on in the district concerning the improvement of housing and the environment? 81% did know, 13% knew just partly, and 6% had some information.

Have residents taken part in arranging outdoor territories formerly? Just 27% of respondents had taken some part, the rest of 73% had not.

On the other hand, the willingness to get involved was from 54% (concerning outdoor territory) to 24% (concerning common-use places for recreation).

Who should undertake the responsibility of arranging the outdoor space around the buildings? Respondents considered that this is mostly the responsibility of the municipality and other institutions. Although at the same time it cannot be stated that the residents ignored their responsibilities. Two answers could be given to the question, and so a great deal of respondents obviously combined the responsibilities of the Housing Management Offices and residents for their environment, thus accepting a bilateral co-operation model. However, further study is needed in order to draw more exact conclusions.

Currently, both state and municipal governments are transferring ownership of housing to individual tenants. In general, people are not ready to accept the transfer of responsibility in regards to the management of the housing environment and apartments.

## **Changing Public Attitudes and Motivating for Action**

Although the problems of the large-scale panel housing environment are not as topical for our society, the process of solving them will be long and complex. The state and municipalities gradually reduce their involvement in management of buildings and the housing environment, increasingly leaving it to the tenants in the post-privatization phase.

A human being living in the community establishes links with other people. To implement co-operation, people need to believe that this is a way to a better life, as well as trust other people. The level of trust is weak in Latvia, as it is shown by research conducted in recent years. Most people do not believe in the ability to influence public life; this explains the lack of public initiatives and co-operation.

If the environment is not aesthetically attractive, and if the individual cannot establish stable emotional bonds with the environment, it is difficult to insist on the individual's contribution towards projects for environmental improvement. People actually do not consider themselves as those eventually improving the community's quality of life, and the concept of improvement does not meet any response.

A person or generation as a whole is conscious of itself through the self-created objects surrounding them. When the country and society on the whole is changing, the same happens to one's personal awareness, mental values and attitude towards one's dwelling. In this case, people are offered more choices to decide and act on one's own. However, much has to be done by the government, municipal and public institutions to bring about the changes in people's attitude towards their housing environment.

The legacy of the past burdens us even now in various forms. People do not enjoy collectivism; they are somnolent and difficult to get involved in a common action. Therefore, work with the public is of key importance in motivating people for joint action. Nothing can occur automatically, including the sector of improving of the housing environment. The time has already come for evaluation of what social problems can arise in these districts and whether the improvement in these problem areas will require much more investment in the future if they are postponed. This is a question to be answered right now.

## **Conclusions**

Issues of public involvement in the improvement of large-scale panel housing need to be addressed in a more systematic manner. Our review of these problems highlights some of the important themes and issues presented by the democratisation of society. It identifies possibilities for mobilizing the human potential to improve people's own housing conditions and residential

environment within a supportive public framework for action. Arranging and improving of the large-scale housing environment is not so much an issue of particular sites, but of public involvement and motivation of the people themselves.

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