

Research project

"Asset integrity assurance in refurbishment work"

Sustainable measures to improve late 1960s and 1970s housing stock – an asset integrity assurance catalogue

subsidised by the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning

Summary

Project background and conception

Since the early 1980s, housing stock built in the late 1960s and 1970s has declined in favour with people in western Germany. Many people who were mobile and better off have left the housing estates and growing numbers of "difficult" households, including many migrants, have moved in. As resident social structure grew increasingly one-sided, the housing stock's existing shortcomings became apparent, especially as the housing and infrastructure they provide were designed for stable working households.

Comparable trends have arisen in eastern Germany since reunification, encouraged by expansion and diversification of the housing supply and, in many towns, by the population shrinkage.

Given the low level of demand and scarcity of resources, future improvements to this housing stock must be geared more to the criteria of costs and consequential costs, suitability for daily use and sustainability.

The survey looked into successful improvement measures undertaken over the past 20 years. Ten housing companies representing about 20 estates were covered in the intensive survey. The main focus was on companies with many years' experience of different residential contexts.

Given that many measures form part of a comprehensive concept and that different local circumstances require suitably adjusted approaches, the documentation is laid out in terms of problem, solution approach, (package of) measures and results. Demolition and revitalisation were largely left out of the equation, having been the subject of another survey.

With the large number of individual measures a choice had to be made. Measures were investigated that were either aimed at the housing's specific shortcomings, required a special budget or were virgin territory for most of the parties concerned. Special attention was paid to measures with a "multiple benefit" and to measures that strengthened communication between residents and identification with the estate.

Findings

Refurbishment led to a distinct improvement in living conditions on the estates that were investigated. Social hotspots were dealt with, at least the larger estates now have an infrastructure that is above average in quality and nearly everywhere the state of the environment is excellent, and not just for children. In part, the rents charged on these estates are fairly low because increases cannot be enforced.

At present the properties on many estates are fully let. Maintenance work is carried out and further investment is often under way. Others, at least in part, are evidently available.

Whether the improvements will suffice for the future is another matter. A part of the success in letting is due to a general increase in housing demand in the 1990s. No real success has yet been achieved in eliminating these housing estates' negative image. Only in occasional instances has "external" demand been generated.

In spite of the failure to recruit the desired tenants this housing stock is still required and residents' activities and functioning networks exist everywhere. That is why the stock must be kept on the market, in other words maintained and developed, if it is not to be reduced in status once and for all to that of a catchment basin for people who have no alternative.

What, then, is to be done?

- Normality must be restored (defects rectified, usability and functional capability re-established and building services brought into line with higher requirements).
- The estates' prospects must be clarified (they must be either allowed to run down, maintained and developed or earmarked for a thorough upgrade).
- Sensible "multiple-benefit" improvements must be implemented (everything that creates smaller-scale structures and manageable areas, makes taking possession, identification and communication possible, utilises opportunities and potential and improves the estates' external image).
- Further development must be seen as a communal task and based on cooperation.
- Information and active participation for residents is to be ensured.
- Participation by residents and support with ongoing work in an honorary capacity must be supported.
- Employment opportunities must be offered and made use of.

The question whether improvements or individual measures will be affordable in future does not arise in this form. The question that is likelier to arise is how fast housing estates will backslide if nothing is invested in their development. There may not be as much funding available as 20 years ago, but that is merely an argument for putting it to more targeted use.

Sustainability does not, however, mean "for the next 100 years". It means not too little and not too much in relation to the objective, and with recognisable benefits. An estate's prospects are a pointer toward what makes sense and is therefore sustainable: suitable for the target group, temporary or "forever". Investment can accordingly either have a limited timeframe or be aimed at variability.

If an estate has no prospects because the wrong houses or flats are on offer at the given location, all that remains is to balance income and maintenance expenditure, an expensive conversion (usually on a par with costs for new buildings), or swift replacement to activate the area for other tasks.