

Less damage to and soiling of residential estates: Are there an effective solution?

Summarised version

A survey

Property maintenance is part of a housing association's every-day business. The image of a housing property plays a significant role when it comes to finding tenants. Flats, residential buildings and outdoor facilities that are well-kept enhance the value of the overall property and make sure that the property is privileged with tenants.

Property maintenance includes taking counteraction against wear and tear as well as eliminating damage which would not even occur if the tenants were to behave in a different way. This is the subject of this survey which deals with

- vandalism or damage and soiling caused with gross negligence
- of joint areas of rented flat properties – entrances, staircases, cellars, lifts, outdoor facilities.

The aim of this research project was to find out how such problems could be avoided or minimised. Which strategies could be successfully used against vandalism or wanton damage and soiling? 15 housing associations with suitable scope and experience were visited and interviewed and local meetings were held with other experts. The survey illustrates which approach could be pursued for prevention and problem solution and which strategies are effective particularly from the housing associations' point of view.

Significance of damage and soiling

In many residential estates, damage caused by vandalism or carelessness does not constitute a major problem. In some residential estates, they, however, occur excessively and become a nuisance to tenants, owners and

property managers alike. In other areas there are indicators which could point to an increase in breach of the order.

For tenants, damage and soiling implies a deterioration of the quality of life, social order and the feeling of security. For housing associations, such damage and soiling impairs the efficiency, reduces the value of the property and marketability by "good" tenants moving out and a bad image being created. For housing associations, elimination of the acts of vandalism or gross negligence is part of cleaning, preventive and corrective maintenance jobs. This causes additional costs and ties up staff capacities. Only part of the costs - mainly for cleaning and caretaker services - can be passed on to tenants as operating costs and burdens their budget. In case of damage, it is generally the housing association that has to bear the costs of repair if the person who caused the damage cannot be determined or is unable to pay.

The consequences of damage and soiling by far exceed the costs of elimination and the scope of specific nuisance. Residents and visitors alike do take in the state of a house or suburb and whether it is kept in order. Although not everybody has the same idea of cleanliness and tidiness standards, it is considered a sign of negligence when a lot of damage or soiling is visible. It is implied that law and order no longer rules there, that the social order is disturbed, that one can no longer feel safe in this environment. This damages the image of the suburb, the residential estate and its residents.

Strategies against damage and soiling

Housing associations have refined their qual-

ity management and controlling structures. They make sure that

- they are regularly, quickly and specifically informed about the problems and difficulties on an ongoing basis;
- if possible, special action is taken in focal problem areas;
- damage is eliminated quickly;
- preventive options are exploited better when renting out flats, regarding property management and administration;
- and, last but not least, that structural options are exploited. This includes complex money-consuming improvements in focal problem areas as well as targeted specific action in danger zones of the building or improved customised solutions which are gradually implemented as standards, such as: in smaller houses, relocation of mail-box areas to outside the building, accessible from outside.

The housing associations interviewed rated the success of various strategies for the avoidance or mitigation of damage.

- In their opinion, what is most successful is to avoid signs of negligence and to quickly repair damage. This means that property management, caretaker and waste management are particularly important.
- They also think that controlling social structures in residential estates and supporting good neighbourhoods are of primary importance.
- Administration and property management in general and all of the structural aspects (enabling visibility/ social control, face-lifts/modernisation as well as robust structural solutions) are considered to be of medium importance.

- What is of minor importance according to housing associations is information, involvement, transparency of costs as well as surveillance, sanctioning, prosecuting delinquents.

But housing associations also use these approaches and do not consider them to be in vain; this shows that there is no “panacea” but that a combination of several approaches promises to be most successful. The housing associations with whom we have talked about their strategies for mitigating damage and soiling emphasised the extent to which this issue depends on the company’s philosophy and management as a whole: Ranging from renting out and structural improvement to cleaning. In the evaluation of the significance of the individual factors, the housing associations emphasised differed aspects. They always realised, however, that approaches only prove to be fully effective if used in combination.

Common areas: entrance, staircase, lift, cellar

The common areas – particularly the entrance – influence the overall impression conveyed by as well as the image of the property, including the conduct of residents and guests alike. Although social conduct is not determined by structural situations, the structural situation may have a positive influence on the social conduct. This also applies the other way around: In inhospitable houses with neglected common areas it is more likely that inhabitants will not take care of the houses as well. This is a known interrelationship which is also specifically used for social stabilisation of problematic properties – in most cases, successfully - particularly if structural renovation is integrated into a holistic upgrading concept.

Offering structural protection against soiling and damage:

- using robust material (corrosion-resistant, stainless steel, harder ceramics, robust types of glass);
- protection of base areas (tiles, washable layers, artistic design by residents, legal graffiti);
- brick walls between cellar compartments instead of partitioning with wood;
- improved illumination of danger zones (motion detectors instead of light switches);
- improvement of visibility (transparent glass doors, mirrors).

Facades and walls

The problem that occurs most frequently is graffiti and marking of facades and walls. Structural measures that may be used to prevent it:

- treatment of facades with a graffiti-resistant layer suitable for the surface which makes it easier to remove graffiti;
- making facades unattractive to potential sprayers by vertical tiling or other uneven or course surfaces;
- making facades unattractive to potential sprayers with dark or particularly colourful designs, also by asking for a painting;
- making it more difficult to access the façade, for instance by fencing;
- perennial plants on large areas of the façade/base;
- visibility protection between the façade and public roads by means of hedges, trees or
- light, if applicable in combination with motion detectors.

Outdoor areas

What has proven to be effective in outdoor areas:

- improving cleanliness, e.g. with patrols, additional cleaning staff, caretakers, cleaning campaigns with residents;
- improving illumination in danger zones (e.g. motion detectors);
- no areas of invisibility with fences, walls or hedges;
- placing trees and bushes in a strategic place to prevent unorthodox parking and unmanageability;
- using robust, resistant materials;
- coating properties which are very difficult to clean;
- increasing social control (e.g. promoting the use and occupation of outdoor areas by residents, separating the semi-public from the private areas);
- involving residents in planning, design and maintenance of properties (e.g. joint campaigns, joint gardens of tenants, responsibility for flower beds, own areas created by young people).

Waste

Various systems have been developed for storage of waste until disposal. What is particularly effective is if every household has its own waste bin. The housing associations have been successful with external waste management and cooperation with municipal authorities or regulatory agencies (wrecked cars) or suburb management.

Structural/technical approaches:

- selection of suitable waste containers (waste locks, compactors, containers with small openings, no shafts);

- mailbox systems with angular deposits or organised deposits for advertising material;
- surveillance: video, lift trick, motion detector;
- individual enclosed cellar compartments;
- only suitable dustbins/waste bins outside, maintenance, if applicable, elimination;
- suitable locations – clear responsibility, limited accessibility, lockable, social control;
- enclosure and good illumination of waste areas;
- high quality structural solutions as part of an overall concept.

Range of action

In addition to structural and design aspects, the following are successful means of counteracting soiling and damage:

- Demonstrating presence at the property: professional property management by trained staff shows that housing associations keep an eye on the property, ensures good communication between tenant and landlord, guarantees that damage is recognised and eliminated quickly.
- Surveillance according to need and prosecuting delinquents: Awareness and alertness play a significant role in living together as neighbours, last but not least to feel safe. This is facilitated by good visibility, inside and outside, and illumination of the common areas, inside and outside. In some properties, it can be rather successful to have residents exercise informal control by looking after the residential environment. In other properties, where hardly anybody knows somebody, it may be necessary to deploy own or third-party staff, make video recordings, work with the police. Once has become apparent who caused damage, the delinquent must be prosecuted.
- Information and transparency: It must be communicated that the condition of the environment of tenants is also a result of their behaviour. In the best case scenario, costs may be invoiced directly to delinquents. Transparent, if applicable, separately commented, statements and keeping flat rates to a minimum make tenants aware of how they can reduce their costs. In general, the cost of damage and soiling should be pointed out. Information is provided via tenants' publications, by personal contact, verbal propaganda, consulting. As a general rule, written information is only read selectively and has been proven to be less effective.
- Controlling social structures: In "neighbourhoods unable to cope" in which various problems occur excessively, there is little residents can do about destructive or grossly negligent conduct. Depending on how much range of action exists, housing associations attempt to control the social mixture in their properties by checking the financial standing of their tenants in order to prevent the social structure from being unilaterally influenced by underprivileged neighbourhoods. In general, strategies that have been proven to be effective are upgrading of buildings and mixture of standards of flats, conversion of rented into owner-occupied flats or construction of additional owner-occupied flats and exploitation of range of action permitted by law for social housing.
- Strengthening of neighbourhoods: There are various approaches for improving the atmosphere in properties and the attitude of tenants, depending on the on-site condi-

Conclusion: Principles of more cleanliness, tidiness and safety in residential es-



tions: They range from support of selective campaigns where residents are given an opportunity to get to know each other and involvement projects in the creation of free areas or staircases to provision of common rooms or involvement in systematic cooperation in the suburb, be it by teamwork, suburb management or the like.

Explanatory statements and superior strategic guidance

There are various ways of explaining what fosters an atmosphere of non-respect and destructive behaviour: the anomy theory, socialisation and learning-theory explanations, frustration and aggression theory, labelling approach, semantic architecture theory, the theory of socio-cultural environments. Counteraction approaches are also based on fundamental considerations: the causer principle according to which the person who caused costs has to bear them, the performance principle based on the relationship between the landlord and the tenant, to enforce law and order, strategic portfolio development and principles of environmental design and town planning which also have an impact on the conduct of tenants.

Showing respect

Purpose

Cleanliness and intactness of houses and outdoor facilities, attractive design of buildings, good atmosphere between and with residents – all of this to show respect for people and objects. This also applies to less privileged residential estates to prevent negative stigmatisation from characterising the social atmosphere. Trimness and tidiness do not constitute an obsession. It is no low-level task to create it. Rather, it shows philanthropy and devotion. This attitude also has a positive impact on behaviour. The following activities are embedded in this principle of “respect”.

Guidelines

- Pursuing upgrading instead of devaluation as a strategy – highlighting cleaning and caretaking issues;
- giving the property a facelift and making repairs instead of allowing its state to deteriorate;
- improving entrances, common rooms and the residential environment with light, friendly, colourful, customised designs;
- consciously “ritualising” and cultivating friendly communication;
- combining social and structural quality.

Examples

- Caretakers demonstrating visible and significant local presence;
- tactical upgrading of inhospitable areas like entrances, passageways;
- comprehensive restructuring to improve the social and structural quality.



Keeping a watchful eye and taking preventive action

Purpose

There is reliable information as to where damage occurs and what the causes are. Damage and soiling may, to the extent possible, be prevented by preventive action in the form of structural, technical, social and organisational activities.

Guidelines

- Analysing any problems that occur in due time, exactly and in detail: nature, place, cause, costs;
- protecting endangered properties;
- using suitable materials;
- placing an emphasis on practical design;
- verifying the effects of action;

Examples

- Team meetings with caretaker, administrator, engineer, social management as a source of information;
- controlling of spending, evaluation of complaints;
- caretakers which also live in the property;
- plants running up facades, plants in front of buildings, uneven or colourful surfaces as a protection against graffiti;
- designing passageways with paintings involving residents;
- high-quality and also robust external lighting.

Prompt elimination – nipping damage and soiling in the bud

Purpose

Fast and recognisable action illustrates that housing associations are aware of soiling and damage and do not tolerate it. This is to prevent a negative trend already at an early stage so that it is not reinforced.

Guidelines

- Also determining defects by demonstrating local presence and making patrols;
- removing graffiti at short notice;
- removing waste and advertising materials that are lying around immediately;
- making sure that repairs are carried out in due time and inspecting;
- quickly responding to complaints by tenants;
- stipulating the response time in quality assurance system.

Examples

- Regular checks after dustbin day;
- visible cleaning action at times when as many tenants as possible are at home.



Appreciating and qualifying property management

Purpose

Trained staff with a professional appearance clearly shows that cleanliness and tidiness are an important quality of life and that the housing association offers a good level of service – which is worth the money.

Guidelines

- Activities and functions of caretakers and cleaning staff should not be considered inferior but assistants to improve the image;
- optimising team work between caretakers, engineers, administration and social management;
- on demand, offering additional services (e.g. cleaning duties);
- communicating services rendered well, also to promote the willingness of tenants to pay for these services.

Examples

- Local work rooms of caretakers – service stations;
- professional workwear;
- training concept.

Actively communicating rules – making sure that rules are complied with

Purpose

Tenants are aware of the fact that a clean and well-kept building and residential environment constitutes a high asset which is enforced by the housing association and for which all residents are required to pay. There will be a response to misconduct as well as positive behaviour.

Guidelines

- Rules (rules of the house) should be given an understandable wording and be communicated in various ways;
- passing on costs as directly and detailed as possible, emphasising the principle of cause and effect;
- responding to misconduct immediately: investigating, reporting, deterring, requesting payment;
- encouraging moral courage;
- contacting social services regarding tenants without residential capabilities, responding in a graduated way, terminating contracts if necessary.

Examples

- Tenant familiarisation and introduction when moving in;
- stipulating duties in the tenancy agreement;
- working with social management and social service regarding problem cases;
- supporting tenants that have made witness statements;
- quantity-related waste fees;
- use of video surveillance options in problem cases, preventive reference, use of

- security teams for patrols;
- stating good examples in tenants' publications (no New Year's Eve edition without fireworks mentioned).

Promoting identification and responsibility

Purpose

Tenants consider their house to be their property and help keep the residential environment clean and attractive.

Guidelines

- Cultivating contact with tenants;
- animating and supporting tenants' activities;
- involving tenants in the recognition of problems, planning, design, maintenance process;
- promoting self-organising networks by tenants.

Examples

- Tenants' gardens, responsibility for flowerbeds;
- balcony competitions;
- cleaning campaign and house party, Christmas decoration initiative;
- tenants' advisory council, neighbourhood associations;
- rooms for meetings between tenants;
- involving tenants in designing new outdoor areas;
- campaigns involving children and adolescents.



Facilitating transparency – seeing and being seen

Purpose

Small-scale action prevents undesired anonymity. Representatives of housing associations demonstrate presence at the residential estate. As many tenants as possible "keep an eye on the street". Potential delinquents must expect to be seen and be held responsible.

Guidelines

- Also forming small units in larger residential estates – visually, organisationally and regarding communication;
- enabling visual links;
- demonstrating visible presence at the residential estate (staff, rooms);
- encouraging awareness, natural alertness and casual social checks.

Examples

- Use of ground floors, windows towards roads;
- benches and other facilities inducing tenants to stay, promoting presence in public areas;
- changing the lift settings (generally stopping and opening doors on the ground floor) to show who is taking bulky waste with him/her to the cellar;
- in large houses, invitation to tenants' meetings hallway by hallway;
- detailed statement of accounts.

Holistic cultivation of proper creating favourable structure



Purpose

Strategic portfolio development and cooperation improve the property location and its image. Common interest of suburb stakeholders in favourable infrastructure, social peace and continuous urban renovation to open up resources and promote synergy effects. Housing associations consider themselves key players in town planning that have a certain amount of responsibility for the wellbeing of the community.

Guidelines

- Carefully selecting tenants – checking their financial status;
- avoiding stigmatisation;
- increasing the diversification of property range (price level, target groups, property types);
- cooperating with socio-cultural organisations, suburb management, municipality, police i.a. in the suburb with local initiatives;
- participating in urban renovation and town planning.

Examples

- Distinguished structural upgrading and complementation of range of flats;
- privatisation to people who occupy flats themselves, supplementary construction of owner-occupied flats;
- round tables, teamwork, establishment of suburb management;
- commitment to "social town" and municipal crime prevention projects.

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