

Research project

“New buildings to provide a wider range of housing”

Low-cost new buildings for rent that are similar to owner-occupied homes and thereby add to housing available on existing estates

subsidised by the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning

Summary

Project background and conception

Demographic development is increasingly accompanied by spatial segregation in urban areas. The result is a growing economic burden on the public sector and on private landlords in both inner cities and on the outskirts of urban areas because monostructures are fundamentally vulnerable and more expensive due to the lack or inadequacy of social networks that then need replacing by a specific infrastructure. There is a risk that increasing “childlessness” in city centres may manifest itself in a change in infrastructure and an environment that in the long term is functionally and socially geared entirely to other groups.

The research project presents to local authorities and investors newbuild solutions for family-friendly urban living. The survey is based amongst other things on 23 examples, of which 15 are documented. Examples were chosen deliberately to cover different combinations of housing market, type of area and provider.

The main focus is on apartments for rent. The requirements of different target groups were taken into account by the inclusion of different housing types, apartment sizes, price categories and urban facilities along with a number of owner-occupied units.

Results and recommendations

The examples investigated show that inner city homes do attract families. Housing types that resembled owner-occupied homes were easy to let at all locations investigated, while owner-occupied units soon found buyers and were partly planned by their buyers – in some cases after initial scepticism.

These projects led to a qualification and differentiation of homes on offer. In many cases local families that were keen to move made use of the newbuild units and thereby directly ensured the survival of social networks. By means of higher building density the owners have, all in all, created added value for other tasks, albeit not always to the extent desired.

Yet there can be no mistaking the fact that many projects had to be taken forward in the face of more or less intensive local resistance that required a considerable outlay and in some cases additions to existing housing stock.

Regional and local conditions, from the housing market via town planning and the existing social structure to preferred housing types, have an influence on what is feasible in a town and in a certain type of urban area there.

New buildings do not need to copy existing housing stock, but they must match the area in respect of scale, value and appearance. Standardised housing types – a tried and tested way to limit costs – should remain adjustable in apartment size and quality to suit different surroundings.

Architecture has an effect on quality and cost, and thereby on certain target groups, but these groups are not prepared to accept just any environment and they have demands in respect of plot size, house and apartment quality, appearance and parking space. For some types of building there is no regional demand, and not all architecture can be realised in every construction context.

For a quantitative effect, building on larger areas of attractive “wasteland” is a strong contender. To develop existing residential areas and “support” families that still live there, additions within existing developments are also needed, in other words a large number of smaller projects. In most types of urban area space is still available to build additional family-friendly housing. Making use of it can, however, prove difficult where land ownership is fragmented. Owner interests will coincide to only a limited extent in these circumstances. That is why a background concept, assistance and model projects are required.

Demand from families certainly exists, as examples and investigations in a number of towns have shown. Many of those who choose to move to the outskirts of cities are for the most part not fixated on the outskirts or in newbuild areas planned for families. Migration is for many merely a compromise because they can neither find nor expect to find anything suitable in the inner city. What people actually prefer are evolved structures with good transport connection, as evidenced by the orientation toward attractive smaller towns in the surrounding area. Furthermore, people are also ready to make considerable compromises in respect of the apartment, especially in larger towns, when it comes to the type of building, floor space and size of garden, as long as there is privacy and freedom to decorate the home as the dweller sees fit and the price is right.

Complementary expenditure consists mainly of traffic calming and control measures in specific residential areas, of providing a reasonable network of local footpaths and of making provision for pedestrians to cross main roads.

Moreover, a family-friendly policy is needed. A stronger alignment to the needs of local residents is indispensable to keep living in the inner city attractive. In addition to building and housing authorities, this is the responsibility of officials in charge of planning reliably the infrastructure on which families depend.

A conceptual framework makes sense as a basis for the deployment of resources and administrative activity in order to pave the way for investors and not to have to discuss fundamental issues again for each and every project.

In view of the target group, no *special* programme of housing subsidies or support is needed for inner city home ownership, while owners often do not want any such programmes for build-to-let properties. What is needed, in inner city areas, however, is some form of subsidy for land prices.

Outlook

Provision of a wider range of housing in existing residential areas means intervening in ongoing urban development. The opportunities for change will depend to a large extent on current regional circumstances and anticipated housing market trends, on the readiness to invest of potential developers and, last but not least, on demand.

In spite of the easing of pressure in many housing markets and irrespective of population trends the tendency to migrate toward the outskirts will initially continue. But factors do

exist that will tend to limit the trend. Living costs in remote locations are rising considerably, local authorities on city outskirts will no longer be able to afford to build in dispersed areas and land prices are either rising in attractive peripheral areas toward those on city outskirts or falling in urban areas with declining populations to the prices paid on the outskirts.

As families tend to prefer straightforward, evolved structures, much of the demand can be redirected to inner city areas. Suitable situations can either be put in hand by landlords, investors and local authorities or only exist in urban – as opposed to the more distant peripheral – areas. The potential for adding to what is available is so great in many urban areas that families can play a significantly larger role in many residential areas. The main handicaps are the burden of traffic and the difficult social structure in some urban areas.

The basic town planning conditions for family-friendly housing are frequently less difficult just inside the town limits than in inner city areas. For people looking for somewhere to live they too are an alternative to moving further out, yet *concentrating* newbuilding in these areas is not to be recommended:

- Further building on open spaces burdens adjacent areas with additional traffic and does not make the city more attractive overall because green space and recreational areas are reduced while density of use is increased.
- Migration to outlying areas is limited, but not migration to the outskirts of cities, and nothing is done to counteract migration from inner city areas.

The reasons for migration to outlying areas are not to be found solely in inner city areas. Many residential areas in outer suburbs have become less attractive as a result of road-building, commercial or industrial use, reductions in public infrastructure, thinning-out of public transport and simple uncertainty as to the planning position. For people who live there these factors have changed the living environment where they chose to live. They would benefit in particular from less pressure from commuters and commercial traffic and improved public transport services coupled with lower fares.