solarCity Linz-Pichling – Sustainable City Development

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Comprehensive Sociocultural Planning

A city is "*not a spatial entity with sociological consequences but a sociological entity that is formed spatially*". This famous quote by the urban sociologist Georg Simmel [1] clearly highlights the dilemma inherent in new large-scale urban expansion projects. Spectacular architecture, technologically innovative energy solutions and ecological building concepts are not an adequate basis for sustainable urban (district) development unless they are accompanied by a sustainable vision of "society" and apply a discriminating strategy of social organization to settlement and usage.

Achieving a high degree of social mixing and density as well as a functioning community life in the sense of a "balanced community" was therefore an important goal of the City of Linz in planning and realizing the solarCity. This meant that the new district on the city periphery had to be developed with particular care as regards social planning and in dialogue with all stakeholders.

Expertise and "round tables"

Commissioned by the Department of Social Affairs, the external office Wohnbund Salzburg, working in close cooperation with the City of Linz, the future developers, private social services and an expert on women-oriented planning, prepared "comprehensive sociocultural planning" [2] for the first 1,300 dwellings on the basis of the criteria contained in the READ* architects' master plan. The point of departure for this study was the conviction that anything even approaching mixed urban districts could only be achieved by means of highly detailed "social planning scenarios" [3].

The study describes dwelling occupancy scenarios based on legal form, dwelling size and sociodemographic structure data, and also proposes quality components for achieving urban district development that is as innovative and socially sustainable as possible. The elaborated concepts and proposed measures were discussed and specified at "round tables" with the twelve housing developers and their architectural firms as well as other municipal specialists. In the joint realization of the concepts, the central approach focused on the goal of

* READ: Renewable Energies in Architecture and Design

achieving an “attractive urban district solarCity Pichling with a high quality of life and high quality dwelling conditions”. [4]

“ ‘City’ on the outskirts” as a mission statement?

The large demand for dwellings in the Linz conurbation in the 1990s (12,000, according to provincial statistics) gave rise to the planning of a new, purely residential district with a focus on “social housing” on the outskirts of the city. It was thus clear from the start that in the case of the solarCity Pichling, the issue would not be to create more “city” in the sense of mixed-use urban development, but at best to achieve a compromise such as is found in almost all recent urban development projects in Austria and abroad. It is the opinion of many urban researchers that in recent years no real urban developments have been built in any case, but only housing estates and other suburbs camouflaged to varying degrees to appear urban or anti-urban. [5] Nevertheless, the objective followed in developing the solarCity was to achieve an urban structure that was as mixed as possible and to effectuate this compromise with painstaking attention to detail.

The goal was thus to develop socially compact and highly innovative housing solutions as functioning modules of the urban development area and to complement them with a future-oriented sociocultural infrastructure.

Scenarios for dwelling mix and occupancy

The waiting lists of the participating housing developers, survey data evaluated by the province of Upper Austria, statistics, specially evaluated microcensuses, interviews with social organizations and other sources [6] as well as the experiences of other comparable large development areas in Austria and abroad formed the basis of considerations regarding a socially acceptable population and dwelling mix.

“Scenarios” were prepared as simulations of what the dwelling mix and the structure of households in the first two planning phases of the solarCity might look like, depending on the respective assumptions on which each was based. The following scenarios were compared:

- Scenario 1: actual scenario (Linz average)
- Scenario 2: developer scenario (based on waiting list data)
- Scenario 3: target scenario (qualitative social mix)

The data and percentages of the target scenario were intended to be seen not as absolute “benchmarks”, but as approximations, as trends.

As far as orienting the project towards social target groups was concerned, the planning focused not so much on remedying the general lack of “typical” dwellings but rather on the lack of “space” for divergent needs and new market groups. Therefore one of the goals was to arrive at a qualitative differentiation of the demand for housing, in particular by taking into consideration non-family user groups, and to offer a variety of appropriate solutions, including larger dwellings for potential home-buyers, intercultural housing, and solutions for multi-generation families, apartment-sharing or “working and living”.

Quality components in housing design and district infrastructure

As a supplement to the target scenario for dwelling occupancy, a list of other quality components for "social life" in the planning area, including examples, was prepared in cooperation with the developers and the competent city administration departments, and recommended for implementation. [7] These included:

- a diversity of building forms and densities, with use-oriented living environments,
- manageable building sizes (100 to 300 dwellings) and neighborhoods (15 to 30 dwellings), with identity-promoting features,
- a diversity of housing developers and investors, bound by quality agreements,
- a differentiated mixture of legal forms and a broad range of dwelling sizes and floor plans [8],
- a sustainable mix in the social structure and the age structure through the integration of new dwelling forms and new household forms as well as of special target groups,
- the creation of attractive recreation spaces and focal points for leisure activities and communication [9],
- the creation of open spaces and nature spaces with high user quality,
- differentiated concepts of resident participation and self-organization,
- the institution of a "city district management office" as a networking hub (infocenter) with community work professionals and
- the development of dwelling experiments and pilot projects.
- In addition, the following quality components were proposed for the central infrastructure of the district:
- the establishment of a network of social services including consulting services and day care,
- the establishment of four small "neighborhood centers" as decentralized, focal points of local social activity,
- the provision of a central infrastructure for social affairs and health, education and culture (education center) as well as day care for children and teens, to be completed at the same time as the housing,
- public administration institutions (including an urban district office), an ecumenical center, meeting rooms for political groups and other associations and
- stores within easy reach.

Social planning in review

Looking at the social planning as a whole, it can be said that a remarkable number of the quality components recommended were actually implemented. This is increasingly evidenced by the residents' satisfaction with their new living environment, their identification with the district and the development of active neighborly relations.

Despite the efforts of all the protagonists, detailed social planning as a prerequisite for a "balanced community" in the solarCity proved to be difficult to implement, and the targeted differentiation, in the form of versatile living environments, was only achieved to a limited degree.

Ultimately it was not possible to take the requirements of social and demographic transformation and new household structures into account in the solarCity to the hoped-for extent, nor to make as much allowance for the integration of experimental dwelling forms as anticipated.

The sociocultural infrastructure of the solarCity, which is mainly concentrated in the district center, is better than the average and of high quality – and was also completed on time. As a result, the solarCity has seen the development of positive signs of usage mix, workplaces in the district, and visible urban life.

A comprehensive evaluation of the solarCity ten years after completion, in terms of the actual population mix, infrastructure use and the question of social and ecological user behavior would be an exciting project.

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