

User-Focused Evaluation: Giving the „Customers“ A Voice

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Abstract

In the tight, supply-driven housing market of urban areas in Switzerland, residents – especially those with limited means – have few choices. Housing qualities important to different groups of residents, their preferences and priorities, the relationships between their living situation and other realms of life, are of little interest to housing providers, as long as almost every apartment is easily rented. In a research project on quality development in housing, we aimed at giving the users a voice and to survey the landscape that emerges from the interaction of architecture design-customer interaction in daily practice.

Evaluation instruments were created, linking a user assessment of housing qualities with a description of the characteristics of a given housing complex, its environment and location. The modularized household survey addresses the qualities of the apartment, the housing complex, its location, neighbourhood relationships, building management, etc. Outcomes are analysed in relation to socio-demographic characteristics of different resident populations. Additional modules explored residents' preferences related to housing renovation, evaluation of energy efficient building technologies, ventilation and heating systems, along with other ecological features of newer or renovated buildings.

The sustainable transformation of the existing housing stock requires awareness, know-how and capital on the part of housing investors/suppliers, supportive government policies, but also needs to involve the perspectives, preferences and everyday behaviour of the actual users of housing. The evaluation instruments – tested in eight housing complexes of varying age, standard, ownership, and location – help establish this link. The planned ongoing expansion of the database will increase our knowledge about housing quality and its potential for improvement and regeneration.

Keywords

User-focused housing evaluation, housing qualities, housing regeneration and maintenance

Introduction

A sustainable transformation of the existing older housing stock requires awareness, know-how and capital on the part of housing investors/suppliers, supportive government policies and possibly incentive programs. Translating the urgent need for making older housing less energy-consuming and thus more environmentally friendly, and at the same time renewing the living space inside or changing tight floor plans to make apartments more spacious and adapted to changed demands, household types and lifestyles, however, also involves social, economic and cultural dimension. The old, not yet renewed housing stock in many European cities often represents the cheap, still affordable housing available to populations segments that are not able to voice their housing preferences and choose accordingly. Instead, they have to feel fortunate to have a space to live in at all, however modest or inadequate it might be.

Examples abound of historical working class neighbourhoods in European cities, gentrified as a result of housing renewal and reconstruction, becoming desirable and hip for newly moving in owners or tenants while displacing those who lived and grew up there. While these phenomena relate to questions of local, regional and national housing and urban development policies, it is argued here that the questions of housing regeneration and maintenance also needs to involve the perspectives, preferences and everyday behaviour of the actual users of housing. Especially those who rent and do not own their house or apartment, have very limited or no influence as to what their home looks like outside and inside. In cities with tight housing markets such as in Zurich, where only about seven percent of the urban dwellers own the house or apartment they live in, this is, quite obviously, by no means primarily a question of “housing the urban poor”.

Giving the “customer” or the residential tenant a voice in evaluating his or her housing situation, stating preferences, indicating priorities, criticising shortcomings, provides important information to decision-makers about housing policy as well as to housing owners, be they private, institutional or non-profit investors such as housing collectives or communities. And it makes sense, as it improves the quality of “the product” in order to better meet the demands and requirements of their tenant residents. It also contributes valuable insights in terms of housing regeneration and maintenance, inasmuch as central aspects of people’s dwelling situations in relationships to the complexities of their everyday lives can be explored. Furthermore, environmentally sustainable housing involves, beyond energy efficient building design, construction or renewal, issues of location as well as user behaviour. What good does a low-energy consumption, “passive” house do in a remote countryside location, where two cars are needed to get the parents to work and the children to school? How effective is a comfort ventilation system, based on the concept of a continuous air exchange process, if it doesn’t work well or if residents do not understand it and still open their bedroom windows in the winter in order to “get some fresh air”?

A contribution to the potentials of a theory of housing?

What might a project such as the one described here contribute to the discourse of the role of theory in housing research, addressed in the very recent special issue of *Housing, Theory and Society* (2009) on this topic? King (2009:43) proposes to create a distinction between *dwelling* and *housing policy*. He criticises housing policy research concerned with the production, consumption, management and maintenance of a stock of dwellings, as “aiming to create rigid and formal analytical structures based on an attempt to understand the provision of entities and their consumption in general”. Instead, King suggests to focus on the term *dwelling*, taking the individual as the starting point, with “dwelling as about being settled on the earth, where we are accepted by the environment and where we ourselves accept it” (p. 42). Part of it, he argues, is an activity in which we use dwellings to meet our ends and fulfil our interests, to such an extent, that this singular dwelling becomes meaningful to us. While King’s suggestion, that an attempt to create a theory of housing should not start with „relying on off-the shelf categories“ has merit, his conclusion „that we should strip housing of all that is external to it and from this position of phenomenological reduction to determine what housing is and does“ (p. 48) provides limited and limiting directions for research. Clapham (2009:5) notes that a theory of housing cannot ignore general theories and concepts, that to cut housing theory making off from other fields and disciplines in general is to run the risk of seeing housing in isolation from wider social processes and structures. Along these lines, Franklin (2006) has argued that “housing is so large in scope and impinges on so many areas of life, that it cannot be conceptualized under the rubric of only one discipline, and what is therefore needed is a more integrated and holistic conceptualization of housing” (p. 2). A

multi-disciplinary contextual approach suggested by Franklin “identifying geographical, cultural, social and individual variables in the use of space, and locating them within a historical perspective” (pp 2-3) appears to be a promising starting point for expanding our knowledge about the phenomenon “wohnen”. The German concept of “wohnen”, for which the best translation probably is dwelling – in then sense that King describes it – rather than housing, embodies the subjectively experienced context in which a person spends a central part of his or her daily existence. “Wohnen” thus relates to the spatial and material context, reflected in answers to the question of „where do you live“, but also to the multitude of activities, interactions, experiences described in response to „how do you live“ in that particular and unique space of life called “home”.

Against this background, the findings reported in this article point to a number of concepts that may contribute to the further development of a theory of “wohnen”, which is seen as a complex web of activities intricately linked to many realms of life. Even though the project was not conceived as a starting point for a „phenomenology of dwelling”, it suggests some interesting findings: 1) It starts with the perspective and valuation of the user, though not in a phenomenological, qualitative context; 2) It focuses on a deliberately selected variety of housing contexts and different types of residents (buildings between 2 and 100 years of age in different states of renewal or repair; housing varying in rental costs from extremely low to rather high, attracting very different groups of residents accordingly; buildings in different geographical locations of Switzerland, in larger and smaller towns with very different housing vacancy rates); and 3) It involves housing complexes with different ownership types, allowing for more or less participation and influence on the relationship between one’s everyday life, its material context and its networks of social interactions.

Many housing providers – especially institutional investors such as banks, pension funds, developers have developed sophisticated tools to manage their housing portfolios. These instruments tend to be limited to the economic dimensions of costs, investments, and profit rates, showing little interest for the qualities important in the life context of the user. Particularly in cities or regions where housing markets are tight with demand exceeding supply – usually for those population segments with limited means – there is apparently little need to care about the quality of the product for the user. Those left with the task of providing “social or subsidized” housing for lower income groups and the outright poor – state and local government bodies, or housing cooperatives rooted in historical self-help traditions – were and in some European countries still are struggling with the quantity problem of providing “decent” affordable housing at all. Traditionally, therefore, they, too, often saw little reason focus on questions of qualities important to residents.

The increasing differentiation in modes of living and value preferences due to demographic, economic and concomitant social and cultural changes, has in recent years led to the emergence of a set of studies placing lifestyle concepts at their core. The large scale study of Schneider and Spellerberg (1999), for example, identified twelve lifestyle groups in Germany. Overall, however, two thirds of the German population, the study found, show relatively steady (and rather conservative) patterns in terms of leisure activities, cultural taste, life goals and everyday activities – as well as in their housing preferences. In the last decade, lifestyle studies have become popular as a foundation for marketing a variety of products and services, among them housing. Described as life-world studies, focusing on value orientations, lifestyles, aesthetic preferences, these approaches identify different target groups or “milieus” based on variations in attitudes towards work, family, leisure activities and consumption patterns, with social stratification becoming a minor factor (Sinus Sociovision, 2007). Translated into target group assessments and marketing tools, the identification of sinus

milieus related to housing is intended to provide information to investors grappling with the question of “whom to build for”. The goal is to differentiate between and attract resident populations in higher income segments, where there is competition on the supply side of housing. Focusing on aesthetic experiences and preferences as distinguishing characteristics between different societal groups in increasingly individualised, open-choice societies, Kritzmöller (2004) identifies a set of clusters in which those belonging to a specific cluster such as “streamline”, “noah’s arch”, “light tower”, and so forth, are related through similarities in their taste. Eventually intended as a marketing tool also, differences in preferences ranging from furniture, equipment of kitchen and bathrooms to apartment size, floor space and preferred community size, can presumably be identified and attributed to various clusters. One of the limitations of these studies are that preferences for one’s dwelling circumstances are not reducible to the very immediate features of the private dwelling space – one’s house or apartment.

Our approach to housing evaluation from a user perspective draws on the post-occupancy evaluation tradition, developed in the late Seventies. POE is defined as the examination of the effectiveness for human users of occupied, designed environments (Zimring & Reizenstein, 1980; Preiser et al., 1988). POE was intended to assess the user friendliness of buildings in the early phase of occupancy. Although an early and useful attempt to question the assumption, that a given building, fulfilling the goals of investors, architects, and builders, would certainly also be appreciated by its users, post-occupancy evaluation never achieved broad diffusion and was not, to our knowledge, used to compare qualities and usefulness of different dwellings in a systematic way. The project addressed here builds on the proposition that the quality of dwelling or “wohnen” encompasses many more dimensions than the spatial, architectural, material qualities of one’s private space in a building, but would also have to include semi-private, commonly used spaces, the appearance of the building, the immediate building environment, the context of the building in terms of location (neighbourhood, access to services, transportation, schools, workplace, etc.), the nature of social exchange relationships in a building and its neighbourhood, and finally the quality of housing management and maintenance.

Data was collected and analyzed in the context of an applied research project aimed at developing a set of evaluation instruments for the assessment of housing quality from a user perspective [1]. Residents’ evaluation of housing qualities was to be linked with the characteristics of the housing complex they live in, its environment and location. The modularized household survey addressed the qualities of the apartment and the housing complex, its location, neighbourhood relationships, building management and maintenance, etc. Outcomes were analysed in relation to socio-demographic characteristics of different resident populations. Additional modules explored residents’ preferences related to housing renovation, evaluation of energy efficient building technologies, ventilation and heating systems, along with other ecological features of newer or renovated buildings. The evaluation instruments – tested in housing complexes of differing age, equipment standard, rental costs, ownership, and location – aim at linking these variables with the qualities of the objects studied and their suitability for the varying life situations and preferences of their users. The ongoing expansion of the modularised database is expected to increase our knowledge about housing quality and the many parts that make up the whole

Findings from a comparative evaluation of seven rental housing complexes

The results of our research indicate that if differentiated questions are asked, there is a considerable degree of variation in the assessment of different dimensions of importance to

the quality of one's dwelling context. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, among the seven rental housing complexes studied, it was not the two newest, architecturally most notable complexes with generous floor plans, modern appliances, embedded in fashionable landscape architecture, which residents were most satisfied with. A variety of qualities seem to emerge as differentiating factors, among them the socio-demographic characteristics of the dwellers, the appearance of the housing complex (state of the building), the quality of housing management, relationships with neighbours, location in terms of quality of neighbourhood, access to public transportation and infrastructure facilities, as well as the overall subjective judgement of the cost/benefit ratio, relating to the simple question: "What qualities that are important to me do I get for what I pay?"

Residents' overall satisfaction in different housing complexes

Table 1 shows a comparison of the seven rental housing complexes, in terms of survey participants' rating of their overall satisfaction with their housing situation. (One complex of owner-occupied houses is excluded here).

Table 1: Residents' overall satisfaction with their current housing situation

Housing complex / city / year of construction	high / quite high	partly high / partly low	quite low / low
R (St. Gallen) 1946-53	95 %	5 %	-
J (Zurich) 2002	91 %	-	8 %
E (Zurich) 2004	84 %	14 %	2 %
G (Wil) 1989	75 %	22 %	3 %
A (Zurich) 2006	71 %	20 %	9 %
S (Luzern) 1981	69 %	27 %	4 %
F (Zurich) 1909	64 %	21 %	14 %

The highest ranking complex R, with 95 percent of the residents being very satisfied or satisfied, was built in the late 1940ies. Some of the buildings of this housing complex are located at a busy access road to a highway. While the buildings themselves were renovated, the facades insulated, bathrooms and kitchen renewed, the original floor plans were changed in relatively few apartments only. Many apartments still have very small kitchens and modest size rooms. The overall high ranking – in spite of the not very attractive location and characteristics of some of the apartments – can only in part be explained by socio-demographic characteristics of the residents: many long-time residents in higher age groups. What emerges as important in the answers to more specific questions are the qualities of building and apartment renewal, and in particular the excellent housing management concept that is typical for this private company which owns a considerable number of housing complexes in this city. The manager himself lives in one of the buildings, takes care of any technical problems as they arise and is highly appreciated for his social competence in interacting with the residents. It is worth noting that the city of St. Gallen, where the housing complex R is located, has a well functioning housing market with choices available in different price segments, making it worthwhile for housing owners and investors to care about the satisfaction of their residents. This contrasts with the situation in Zurich, where the vacancy rate has varied between only 0.02 and 0.26 percent in the last decade. This means that of the around 205'000 apartments in the city, only between 40 to 500 apartments were officially on the market at a specific reference date every year, and those advertised are mostly in a higher price range (Stadt Zürich Statistik, 2009).

Also very positively rated is the housing complex J in Zurich, with 9 out of 10 residents being highly satisfied or satisfied. This is a new complex, built by the largest housing cooperative in Zurich who owns over 4000 apartments in the city. The high rating is the result of a very attractive cost/benefit ratio in the view of the residents. This complex represents modern architecture with generous floor plans, bright rooms and spacious balconies. In the same building, but external to the apartments, individual extra rooms with a shower can be rented by residents. These rooms are used as working space or allowing privacy to teenagers while still living close to the family. The ground floor accommodates a variety of infrastructure facilities such as a kindergarten, a child care facility, an exchange shop for children's clothes as well as rooms rented by individuals as office space or by groups in the neighbourhood for a variety of activities such as parent groups, courses, etc. Complemented by a generous children playground and outdoor space, this housing complex is particularly attractive to young families with modest financial means.

The most recently built housing complexes E and A are owned by large institutional investors (bank, insurance company), attracting higher income residents. They are located at the northern edge of the city of Zurich in a previously industrial area. Over the last decade, this neighbourhood has been transformed into a new, very modern part of the city, made up by voluminous office buildings, large housing complexes, infrastructure facilities and four fashionably landscaped city parks and playgrounds. Apartments are in a higher price range, with exceptions of older housing in the adjacent traditional neighbourhoods and two modern housing complexes built by a housing cooperative, one of them being J, mentioned above. Housing complexes E and A receive lower ratings by their users despite objectively higher building and apartment standards, with the less centrally located complex A being rated more critically than complex E. The benchmarking analysis shows that of the seven housing complexes evaluated, these two complexes rank at the low end in terms of perceived overall cost/benefit ratio to the user. The quality of mutual help and relationships among neighbours also is rated less positively. The more critical assessment of the quality of the overall housing management by the owner firms as well as the day-to-day facility management by residents in housing complex A, further contribute to the lower rating of this complex. The fact, that in both of these complexes facility management is contracted out to an external firm, means that nobody is readily available to take care of the daily problems of residents on site, an aspect that was criticised frequently in the open ended survey questions.

The two most critically judged complexes are F in Zurich and S in Lucerne. Both of them are in need of renovation though to varying degrees. Complex F is located at the Western edge of the city of Zurich in a mixed lower price neighbourhood. It is 100 years old and in urgent need of renovation or renewal. It belongs to a city-owned foundation, established some twenty years ago for the purpose of preserving some affordable housing and small-scale business space in a city characterized by a longstanding shortage of cheap housing. In order to preserve the very low rents, the foundation has not made any major investments neither in the buildings nor in the apartments, but focused on minimal building maintenance and the replacement of appliances as needed. Residents, mostly immigrants with very modest means and students or other young people who share some of the bigger apartments, are free to make their own improvements as desired. Some saw this as a chance, painted walls, put in new floors and ceilings, in order to make their home more pleasant. Others, like the younger people in transition settled temporarily in the apartments as they are. Not surprisingly, apart from the overall cost/benefit ratio which is rated average across all complexes, apartment and building quality as well as facility management of the building receive the lowest rating among the seven complexes compared. The location of the housing complex was rated second worst.

Housing complex F in Lucerne was built in the early 1980ies. The buildings and some of the apartments are in need of renovation which is planned for the near future. Some of the more attractive and more expensive apartments have been renovated, with new hardwood floors and new kitchens being added. Others are worn down, some empty and not rented again due to the planned renovation. As a result, apartments and buildings are judged differently depending on the qualities available. The low rating of the overall cost/benefit ratio seems to be related to the shabby appearance of the buildings and to uncertainties as to when the renovation process might start and what it would entail in terms of disruption and increased rental costs. The quality of neighbourly exchange relationships, the attractively landscaped open space and playgrounds between the buildings as well as the location in a well-liked suburban community of Lucerne, close to a lake, is rated higher than the average of all complexes.

These, still rather general descriptions of some of the characteristics of the seven housing complexes and their overall rating by the residents points to the complex interplay between a variety of qualities that extend beyond apartment appearance, rental costs, state of the building, outside space, location, neighbourly relations and management. User preferences and priorities vary according to socio-demographic characteristics such as age, household type, education, income as well as individual housing biographies and cultural backgrounds.

As an example, this is illustrated in a benchmarking in which different dimensions of housing quality were analyzed according to life phase and social status of residents households in the eight case studies. (Here one housing complex is included where residents are also the owners of their semi-detached houses).

Households with a higher status (income and education) appear to be more demanding and therefore to rate the quality of their housing situation more critically on all dimensions, including apartment and building quality, neighbourly relationships, housing management, location as well as overall cost/benefit ratio.

Life phase differentiation suggests that in our sample older couples tend to evaluate their housing situation more positively on all dimensions, with the exception of social exchange relationships in the neighbourhood. Families with children and young as well as middle age one person households tend to rate the different dimensions similarly and slightly more critically than older couples. The major variation relates to neighbourly exchange relationships. These are judged more negatively by younger and middle age one-person households. Families with children tend to rate these social aspects of housing much more positively, with elderly couples being in between. This suggests that social exchange relationships among neighbours are more important to families with children and to older persons than to younger and middle age one-person households where social ties and exchange might be more externally focused. However, whether this finding is indeed generalizable or is in part a function of the specific housing complexes represented in this as yet limited sample, needs to be explored as the data set grows with more case studies added.

Importance of specific apartment, building and location characteristics

In evaluating a variety of aspects related to their apartments, building and location, users were asked to rate a number of specific characteristics on a four-point scale ranging from “good”, “quite good”, “quite bad” “bad”, and at the same time indicating whether these aspects are “important”, “quite important”, “less important” or “unimportant” to them. The rationale for

linking the quality assessment with the importance assessment being, that if a specific characteristic is of little or no importance to the user, it matters little, whether it is judged as good or not. It also has to be noted, that the findings presented below indicate the averages across all eight housing complexes which vary greatly in terms of age, rental costs, objective apartment, building and location characteristics as well as the socio-demographic aspects of the respondents.

The most important apartment features turned out to be room size, lighting, noise insulation, quality of materials, floor plan and appearance. For families with children, the quality and availability of playgrounds as well as safety aspects related to the traffic situation in the immediate housing environment were considered most important. Table 2 shows the percentage of respondents that considered these aspects as important or quite important.

Table 2: Ranking of the most important apartment qualities

Most important apartment features	Residents ranking these aspects as “important” or “quite important”
Size of rooms	98 %
Light (brightness, sunshine)	97 %
Noise insulation (undisturbed by neighbours)	95 %
Quality of materials (i.e. floors, kitchen, bath)	95 %
Floor plan (layout of the different rooms)	95 %
Overall apartment appearance	95 %
Open space outside / playgrounds (families only)	94 %
Traffic outside (children safety) (families only)	93 %

In the assessment of the qualities of the housing complex as a whole, the overall appearance ranked highest, followed by qualities of the immediate outside environment, ecological / energy saving considerations, architectural design and, at a very practical level of everyday interactions, the management of the use of shared laundry facilities (Table 3).

Table 3: Ranking of the most important housing complex qualities

Most important housing complex characteristics	Residents ranking these aspects as “important” or “quite important”
Overall appearance of the housing complex	91 %
Qualities of outside space	85 %
Ecological / energy efficient building design	83 %
Architectural design	82 %
Management/rules for using shared laundry facilities	82 %

These findings are interesting. While residents certainly more often look out of their windows at neighbouring buildings than at the house they live in themselves, the appearance of their own building is very important to most of them. The building one lives in projects the quality of “the address” to the outsider, the status it has in the neighbourhood – is it average like most other buildings, does it stand out as particularly beautiful or new or as rather ugly and old by comparison? Just as the interior decoration, favourite objects, and traces of use of ones immediate living space – is it poor, ordinary, tasteless, cluttered or more luxurious, special, imaginative, well arranged – reflects much of a person’s status, preferences, identity and way

of life, so might the appearance of the building and setting one lives in provide a screen for identity creation and identification or a source of tension and dissatisfaction.

The rather highly rated importance of ecological and energy efficient building design may in part reflect the fact, that in Switzerland, heating and water costs are paid by the resident, with energy inefficient building structures and heating systems directly impacting on monthly bills. Together with the importance of the architectural design, this assessment might also suggest an awareness by an increasing number of residents of the contribution of good architecture and the important role of the housing stock in a country’s overall energy consumption and impact on the environment.

One’s “address” does not only refer to the appearance of the building one lives in but also to the broader context of the reputation a neighbourhood has within a city. Whether a neighbourhood is considered “good” again depends on a variety of factors, among them the quality of the housing stock and its environment affecting rent prices and thus in large measure determining the social mix of a neighbourhood population and its socio-demographic characteristics. However, beyond these less tangible qualities of image and reputation, available services and infrastructures as well as access to public transportation play an important role in the management of everyday life. Close access to shopping for daily needs and other services are considered to be the most important aspects in relation to the location of one’s residency, followed by accessibility of the centre and proximity to public transportation. Also ranking high is the availability of recreational space in the neighbourhood. Access to cultural options or to restaurants and coffee shops in the vicinity were considered less important (Table 4).

Table 4: Ranking of the most important infrastructure aspects of the location

Most important location characteristics	Percentage ranking these aspects as “important” or “quite important”
Shopping for daily needs	95 %
Other services (post office, medical services, schools, etc.)	97 %
Accessibility of the centre	93 %
Proximity of public transportation	91 %
Recreational space (open space, parks, forests, etc.)	88 %
Accessibility of one’s place of work	71 %
Cultural options/events (cinema, theatre, etc.)	62 %
Restaurants, coffee shops, etc.	53 %

How dwelling space is used – qualities of the room most appreciated by residents

Residents were asked to name the rooms of their apartment according to their main use, for example, living room, eating/living room, bedroom, office, guestroom, etc. Then they were to assign – from a list of different daily activities – those activities to the room in which they mostly take place. Overall findings suggest that larger, integrated cooking/eating/living spaces tend to gain in importance compared to the classical living room. Where such space is available, it becomes the centre of daily life at home. One out of households uses bedrooms also as office space or for leisure activities such as watching TV, listening to music, reading, etc. Balconies are highly appreciated: 90 percent of the households eat there as well, 75 percent spend time there with guests, and 25 percent use their balcony also for other leisure activities.

One-person households use their main room in a very multifunctional way for a variety of daily activities. Surprisingly, one out of ten of these households reports to sleep on the balcony at times. Compared to other households, two person couple households tend to assign one room more frequently as office space or guestroom. For family households with children, large kitchens or cooking/eating/living spaces are the centre of daily life. Children seem to be there more often than in their individual rooms. As space in family households is frequently more limited, one out of five family households uses bedrooms also as office space or for household work, such as ironing, etc.

The room most frequently used is also the room described by residents as the room in which they prefer to spend most of their time, where they feel most comfortable. The rooms mentioned most often are large kitchen/eating areas or eating/living spaces. In an open-ended question, residents were asked about the most important qualities characterizing these rooms and thus accounting for their preferred use. The most frequently mentioned qualities were brightness, size, flexibility in furnishing, personal touch, furniture and decoration, cosiness, and having a good view. “Cosy, large, bright, relax, watch TV, everybody can be and eat together, here”; “spacious, bright, access to TV, books, music, computer”; “nicely and personally decorated, flexibly usable, great view”, were some of the comments on these recurring themes. These statements varied little in spite of the very different apartment qualities found in the housing complexes evaluated.

Social exchange relationships and neighbourly qualities

The quality of one’s dwelling situation, particularly in rental housing, seems also dependent on the relationships with one’s neighbours. Neighbours can be a source of great irritation, and ongoing or escalating conflicts might lead residents to look for another place to live. Alternatively, positively valued, often long-term, mutually supportive relationships with neighbours can be an important aspect of everyday life, counterbalancing other more negative aspects of one’s housing situation. Seventy-six percent of all respondents rated good neighbourly relationships as “important” or “quite important” to them. About two thirds of these persons judged their neighbourly relationships as “excellent” or good”, another 29 percent as “mediocre”, the remaining 8 percent as “not very good” or “bad”. Interestingly, half of the respondents in one of the newest housing complexes, where neighbourly relationships were less developed and judged more critically, said they would like to have more interaction with their neighbours. By contrast, only 25 percent of the residents in complexes with well established interactions with neighbours wanted even more contact.

Housing Management and Maintenance

The quality of housing management and maintenance is an important aspect in determining the quality of ones dwelling situation in residential rental housing. In contrast to home and apartment owners, residents in rental housing usually have little say over the quality of management and maintenance. With dwelling being such a central part of one’s life, feeling respected and taken seriously by housing owners and facility managers is related to a sense of control and influence over an important realm in one’s life. The survey asked residents to judge the friendliness and helpfulness of the contact persons in the management firms, the quality of information provided, the quick and professional handling of maintenance problems and repairs, the friendliness and helpfulness of the housing manager on site and his or her concern for cleanliness. Not surprisingly, the housing complexes with the highest ratings in terms of overall satisfaction with one’s housing situation were those, where the quality of

management and housing maintenance was judged most positively, independent of other qualities of the housing complexes (architecture, age, rental costs, etc.) By contrast, the critical assessment of management and maintenance found in the two most modern and higher priced complexes seemed to contribute significantly to the overall reduced satisfaction in these setting.

Housing regeneration and renewal

As in many Western as well as Eastern European cities, the challenge is not so much the type of new housing to be built, but how to renew and renovate the existing housing stock. In Switzerland, only about one percent of new housing stock is added every year in terms of new construction or replacement of old housing. The largest share of the current housing stock was built between the late 1940ies and the mid 1970ies. Most of these buildings do not meet today's requirements in terms of building technology, insulation, materials used, floor plans, and the changing demands for dwelling space. Economic and demographic changes, resulting in a differentiation and shift of household types and lifestyle preferences have massively altered the characteristics of the population to be housed and with it the demand side. From an overall housing market and housing policy point of view, the issues are how to apply energy-efficient technologies and environmentally sustainable materials in the design and construction of new housing, how to renew and renovate existing older housing stock to better meet environmental standards of energy efficiency and reduced pollution, while at the same time accommodating changing household structures and lifestyles. Yet in cities with tight housing markets, deconstruction and major renewal of existing housing stock has to be balanced with the demand for affordable and cheap housing for lower income population segments, who often have to rely on these unattractive options, if they are to find housing at all.

For decision-makers in the institutional, private and public building sector, giving the customer a voice in the context of renewal and renovation may lead to better and socially more sustainable solutions. For this purpose, the residents in the two housing complexes in need of renewal were asked a set of questions as to their preferences in this respect. As the answers between the two complexes affected were similar, the average percentages are reported here. Around 60 percent of the residents would welcome a renewal of their housing complex. About 70 percent would like to continue to live in the complex and four out of five households would like to stay in their current apartment. Around 45 percent in housing complex S, where family households make up about the same percentage, would like to stay because of their children. Three out of four households in both complexes considered kitchen renovation as important, two thirds also mentioned renewal of the bathroom and for around one third having a bigger balcony was important. In the older housing complex with very small rooms, one third also would like to see a change in the floor plan, while in the housing complex from the early 1980ies, less than 7 percent saw a need for this. For about half of the residents in both settings, improving the appearance of the buildings was seen as important.

Obviously, there is little that can be generalized from the findings of these two cases. Yet the information was found to be of great value to the decision-makers in terms of planned renewal strategies. The development of a broader data base from other housing complexes in need of renewal and renovation is expected to offer a better understanding of residents' priorities in relationship to their socio-demographic characteristics and the actual qualities important to them in the context of the apartment and complex they live in.

The urgently needed transformation of the existing housing stock along with environmentally sound and energy efficient design and construction of new housing is not merely a technical and economic issue, but also a question of acceptance and demand. Residents can play an important role through voicing their preferences for environmentally friendly housing and through reducing energy-consumption in their everyday activities at home. Asked about the importance of ecological housing design and construction, nine out of ten respondents considered this an important aspect, yet only two thirds rated their own housing complex as “good” or “quite good” in this respect.

Three of the more recently built housing complexes evaluated were built according to the “Minergy Standard”, a Swiss energy efficiency label. It aims at reducing the energy used for room and warm water heating by one third compared to generally prescribed building construction standards. It is also intended to improve the overall indoor air climate, as all Minergy Standard buildings have a so-called “comfort ventilation system” where the air flow in the building occurs in an ongoing air-exchange cycle. Fresh air is continuously provided, making it unnecessary to open windows, which is particularly important during the winter season. Eighty-five percent of the residents in these buildings agreed that opening windows in the winter was no longer necessary. While 60 percent said they would certainly choose comfort ventilation again, if moving to a different apartment, 38 percent said “may be” and only 3 percent said “certainly not”.

Conclusions

The findings described are but a starting point for one type of contribution to furthering a theory of housing. What is suggested is that such an endeavour indeed needs to be interdisciplinary. While studies focusing on social stratification such as income, education and other demographic characteristics can no longer capture the complex picture of today’s increasingly differentiated societies, neither can approaches to lifestyle analysis and aesthetic preferences add more than a piece to the puzzle. Returning to the more encompassing concept of “wohnen” instead of dwelling or housing, the material qualities of the object and its context – the apartment, the building, the immediate environment, the location with its image and available services and infrastructures as well as the interactions and social exchange relationships in the neighbourhood – need to be linked to individual residents, households and their preferences and priorities.

This ongoing study is to be continuously expanded with data from additional housing settings, allowing for more differentiated analysis. While systematic and empirical, it does not rest on the assumption of a superior form of knowing, as Allen (2009: 70) accuses, with a broad sweep, all academic or empirical housing studies. Rather than “constructing a housing studies ‘world view’ that violates the lived experiences and understandings of some constituency or other, of people that live in houses” (p. 71), our approach seeks to complement qualitative approaches to exploring the lived everyday experience of dwelling. By placing the values, perspectives and preferences of different residents at the core of the research interest, it aims at finding commonalities, differences and priorities and trying to understand them in a more systematic manner. And finally, we hope to make housing owners and policy makers more responsive and attuned to the user’s voices, dispelling simple assumptions about “target groups” and “demand patterns”.

Notes

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