

Citizens and Neighborhood

After the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, large housing estates quickly crystallized as a symbol of the failure of socialist policies. They were considered monotonous and depressing, the population was stigmatized, and positive achievements were forgotten. However, the negative image was by far not shared by all residents—after all, for many people these apartments were their first home and the place where they grew up. Among architects and historians, the settlements, with their positive qualities and their weaknesses, were discussed in a much more differentiated way. But nevertheless, there is still a big discrepancy today between the views from inside and outside.

The relatively limited interaction between residents and outsiders—people who move to the settlements often stay there for a long time and outsiders do not visit regularly—cements the divergence of perception. This lack of fluctuation intensifies problems related to the overall demographic trend of an aging society. When the large settlements were planned, they were supposed to be a home for all groups of society, yet today they show a risk of segregation. However, loneliness and boredom are not the only factors to be addressed. As a result of reduced social infrastructures and centralized shopping facilities, the walkability of the districts diminishes and vulnerable groups who are dependent on easy access to these facilities are particularly affected.

Nevertheless, the migration that does occur often brings new groups of people into the settlements and hence the population is becoming increasingly heterogeneous. Both challenges raise an abundance of questions that are addressed in this section. What requirements exist and how can the large housing estates respond to existing and changing demands? What is neighborhood life like in the prefabricated housing settlements? What positive aspects do local people see in these neighborhoods—what do they like and where do they see weaknesses?

This chapter discusses social phenomena of the prefabricated districts, exploring aspects such as strategic plans to adapt them to the diverse needs of the population and the requirements for making them feel like home.

The report by Nilsson Samuelsson, who works in Dresden's municipal urban planning office, reflects the experience gained at the level of city government with urban strategies for large housing estates. The fundamental challenge posed by changing demographics lies in the gap between statistical knowledge and its translation into everyday challenges and lives. General knowledge based on statistics and scientific studies should become a self-evident and sustainable contribution to each specific neighborhood and its inhabitants as well as the diverse city as a whole. However, established characteristics of a specific neighborhood—regarding its location within the city, its built structure and local history as well as the composition of social structures and the active subcultures of its inhabitants—must provide the fundamental framework for any change.

Ekaterina Korableva and Elvira Gizatullina, from the Center for Applied Research, European University at Saint Petersburg, present two case studies of large housing estates in Saint Petersburg that are targets of harsh criticism and are problematized from beyond—by experts, officials, and the media. The two researchers shed light on differing perceptions related to quality of life and the image of mass housing districts, and they also take a closer look at the urban regeneration program *Renovatsiya*, which demolishes run-down khrushchevki and replaces them with criticized high-rise buildings.

Virág Molnár, from the Department of Sociology at the New School for Social Research in New York asserts that a shift of perspective is needed, a new way of approaching large housing estates that treats them as singular and unique rather than simply as individual exemplars of the same generic housing type. Adopting a specific perspective demands respecting the historically distinct configuration and its particular social, cultural, and urban context. Violeta Stefanović, researcher at the Department of Architecture and Urbanism at the University of Novi Sad in Serbia, focuses on collective housing complexes of socialist Yugoslavia. She examines the manner in which the living standards and spatial frame of the residential complexes influence or even shape the communities. This contribution gives us insight into the way communities were able to be forged, inevitably impacting the way social bonds, common ground, and collective consciousness were established in the socialist period.