

Evaluating Factors in the Image of Housing Estates

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Abstract

All over the world, large housing estates stand up very well physically, but they are faced with new social, economic and environmental challenges. Integrated urban regeneration programmes have discovered the image approach, which could play an important role in future-oriented thinking. In the interest of further concept building, this paper endeavours to determine objective evaluation components that are also applicable to the image of the city. Differentiating immaterial and material values, the focus is on the physical elements of the environment that could be changed by urban and architectural intervention. Utility, durability and likability are the main factors analysed and evaluated, together with their role in transforming the image of large housing estates.

Keywords

image of the city • large housing estate • urban regeneration • urban design, evaluation

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Introduction

The large pre-fabricated housing estate is one of the most globalised products of urban design. Examples of them can be found the world over, where they reflect increasing urbanisation, the mass production of housing through industrial construction methods and the new urban form based on modernist theory. At first, it was prestigious to live in this new environment, one which seemed to offer inhabitants superior physical housing conditions and a better quality of life. Nevertheless, it is important to differentiate their position in the Western world and in the former Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In Western Europe and North America, the majority were constructed from the 1950s until the end of the 1970s; today, these large housing estates represent no more than 8% of the housing stock. However, in Central and Eastern Europe, this type of housing is more dominant. In terms of the individual countries, their estimated proportion can vary between 15 and 60%. For example, in Hungary in 2005, it was 17%, but 35% in Budapest in 2001 [14]. The buildings themselves stand up well, but they are faced with new challenges: the physical amortisation of the buildings and environment, in addition to the consequences of economic crises and social segregation tendencies. They are inhabited by low-income groups: aging people, single individuals, single-mother families, multicultural immigrants, etc. [12]. Large housing estates appear to be identical, but their personal stories are very different. Although European countries have various strategies and options concerning the future of these areas (demolition, integrated urban rehabilitation, technical intervention, or simply nothing), they are certain to survive, remaining an important part of the urban fabric, especially in Central and Eastern European, for long time [4].

Hence, in recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on the subject, including investigations into the current social and physical status of large housing estates, case studies of urgent intervention projects and evaluations of housing estate regeneration. This paper focuses on one special, but common aspect of this process: the image approach of urban

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renewal. What real environmental and social qualities of the neighbourhood can be used to promote the development of these deprived urban areas?

2. Methodology and results

This paper uses the expression, *image of the city* that Lynch introduced into architectural and urban language in his major book [9]. Later, Nasar further developed the idea as evaluation criteria for urban environments [11]. Both use the word image, rather than identity, as image is a public opinion, an idea in the mind about what it is like; however, the term identity expresses qualities that differentiate something from another [15]. Based on this general theoretical framework, this paper concentrates on applying the well-known image approach to the special situation of the large housing estate, but without analysing the specific identity of local situation.

Image is generally more important than reality. Nowadays, only negative images are associated with modernist large housing estates, in line with the post-industrial society's new political, economic, cultural and social ideas. Despite this, urban image can easily be manipulated, so it could serve as an effective and inexpensive tool in regeneration programmes for these neglected areas. For this reason, the present study attempts to uncover strong existing elements that can be used to ameliorate the image of large housing estates. Neighbourhood branding depends on the complex context of the large housing estate [5]; yet, within this context, we can readily identify some general key values, both immaterial and material, which represent human ties to the city. While these factors are obviously interconnected, this paper only touches upon the immaterial elements (the subjects of sociology, communication, marketing, environmental psychology, etc.) and focuses on the material aspects that can be changed through architectural and urban intervention.

It is evident that the most significant elements of evaluation are the personal and social components, with people having very different lifestyle and living/housing preferences. Children, however, present an exception, since they have a natural, unquestioning attachment to the site where they live [10]. In the large housing estates, modern architecture and urban design created child-friendly car-free spaces, playgrounds, sporting facilities, educational and cultural institutions. Hence, image building, urban politics and policy can be based upon the children living in large housing estates, who represent the future.

After the freedom of childhood, social position and networking play more important roles in people's lives, influencing their ability to become somebody, do something, entertain options or opportunities, meet with others, participate in events, maintain a secure existence, etc. The built environment provides the physical framework for these social aspects, which may be influenced or developed through an integrated regeneration programme, although it is nearly impossible to determine them. Nevertheless, the evaluation of the image, the perceived



Fig. 1. Budapest, Havana Housing Estate, 2013 (Photo by the author)



Fig. 2. Marseille, playground near the Pharo, 2006 (Photo by the author)

identity of the neighbourhood by residents and the outside world, depends strongly on these unstable social factors.

The large-scale, high-rise prefabricated housing estate is the product of modern urban design and architecture [3]. The theoretical foundations of a radically new urban form (e.g., the ideas of Le Corbusier and Bauhaus) rejected the city of the past and replaced the former design principles with something brand new. Closed effect and multiplicity were altered with the introduction of an open quality and standardisation. In this new typology, buildings are free-standing masses in continuous space, while public spaces outside the blocks flow in and through the visually and physically open urban fabric. There is no traditional urban context anymore; there are no streets or blocks, no well-defined public or private areas, no mixed-use buildings. This is the 20th century urban culture of openness that transformed historic cities centres [8] and created new towns of large housing estates. Nowadays, this urban form is an integrated part of the built heritage that cannot be ignored. To evaluate its image on the basis of the environment's material values, the principle criteria are utility, durability and likability.

Utility is related to the everyday use, more like the function of a given building or public space. Buildings serve present



Fig. 3. Manchester, Islington 2013 (Photo by the author)



Fig. 4. Budapest, Kelenfold Housing Estate, 2008 (Photo by the author)

needs and work for clients; thus, architecturally-speaking, utility is one of the most objective evaluation criteria. Vitruvius is famous for asserting in his book *De architectura*, the first volume on the theory and practice of architecture, that buildings must be solid, useful and beautiful (*firmitas, utilitas, venustas*). Function and beauty are naturally interconnected, but function became predominant in the modernist approach to architecture. In 1851, Greenough wrote that function is “the promise of beauty“. In 1896, Sullivan stated, “form ever follows function,” and Le Corbusier’s architecture became a “machine for living” in the 1920’s [13]. Large housing estate constructions are based on these ideas, so their utility is beyond question.

Durability is also a principal value in the world of architecture, but in this case, where the focus is on the image of the large housing estate, it is not the timeless presence of these buildings and the urban environment. Instead, it is the maintenance and quality of life according to contemporary sustainable requirements. All decisions have to be made with budget in mind, so durability is also an economic question and, consequently, a social one.

Just as with the image of the city, energy efficiency, maintenance costs, dwelling price, mixed-used, urban safety, climatic comfort, public transport facilities, and so on, have informed,

transformed and deformed the image of the city. In the 21st century, assessment systems have attempted to evaluate how the different urban forms contribute to sustainability [2]. Historic city centres, modern large housing estates and detached house areas present extremely different living conditions. Still, in the overall analysis, large housing estates offer plenty of advantages in terms of greening, density, passive solar design, sustainable transport, and decreased energy and water use; their disadvantages lie in diversity, compactness and sustainable communities [7]. Each improvement within this area has an impact on the image; nevertheless, for real transformation, mere physical intervention that serves only some aspects of sustainability (for example, the well-known exterior isolation and painting of the facade, the use of solar panels on the roof and greening of public spaces) is not enough. They aid in the process, but it is dangerous to overvalue their significance.

Likability evaluation seems subjective in the pluralistic contemporary world; yet, aesthetics research has identified visual beauty as one of the most important components of satisfaction, even when evaluating the image of a city. Certainly, aesthetic appreciation has aspects that are culturally and socially learnt, but it is possible to differentiate some objective values [11].

Human beings are children of nature. As a result, the most evident type of beauty is naturalness. A natural environment, a well-designed and maintained green landscape, is likeable. Modern urban design particularly and deliberately planned a new open urban fabric in order to create healthy, mono-functional, clearly organised neighbourhoods with vast open space systems, as opposed to the dense, dirty, dangerous and polluting industrial cities plagued by a very negative image at the time [6]. In contrast to garden cities, large housing estates presented an alternative green model to realise everyone’s dream of living in an environment with a predominance of accompanying natural elements through the construction of dense areas with high-rise, free-standing buildings. In large housing estates, the presence of nature (sunshine, light, air, vegetation, bodies of water) or the opportunity to develop it within the existing open space constitutes a fundamental part of the image.

Besides nature, the other evident source of beauty is created by time. What is old seems beautiful for people in general, as historical environments evoke favourable associations. In modern large housing estates, however, the typical historical context is not apparent. But what is meant by history? A 30- to 50-year period covers a long time with many personal stories. Inhabitants’ stories could be uncovered, thus conserving important material and immaterial elements of the past, defining identity and fostering an attachment to the neighbourhood.

Within the evaluation of the environment, some components are strongly related to the urban fabric. The majority of people have a preference for spatial coherence. They like to feel order and to occupy a well-defined space, together with openness and panoramic views of pleasant elements in the

urban landscape. Large housing estates are designed products of modern urban and architectural theory, but in the 21st century, it is important to find innovative responses to modify the homogeneous fabric, to establish coherence, to give new atmosphere, and to create an environment with buildings and flats suited to today's needs. However, nowadays, there is a clearly expressed call for safer cities and the image of the city has a sensitive dependence on this aspect. Environmental crime prevention studies have discovered that the urban planning and design solutions bear a strong relationship to one of the most important factors in the quality of life: safety [1]. Thus, this is not solely a question of the neighbourhood's likability, but also a normal human desire.

Last but not least, people prefer environments that appear to be looked after and cared for. This, too, is a cultural component of likeability, but its role is also very important in the estimation of the outside world. The upkeep of public areas (such as doorways, staircases, public spaces, etc.) could be effected (or at least aided) through the efforts of inhabitants and volunteers, and their work may gradually establish a new attitude that reflects the changing personal and collective awareness of the neighbourhood. When visiting a site, this civil spirit can be appreciated, thus constituting an integral part of image building.

3. Conclusion

When considering the future of the city, the combination of immaterial and material values presented here is essential, as physical improvements are insufficient to effect a fundamental transformation in a deprived urban area's image. Hence, the image of the large housing estate is a special concept. On the one hand, the branding has already been created, mediated and forced upon people; on the other, it is dreamed, shaped and directed by people, reflecting their actual life. It is important to promote a positive image that conserves the best of the former values, based on the identity of a still-existing attachment with a focus upon the children and col-



Fig. 5. Grenoble, Villeneuve Housing Estate as an architectural monument (?), 2013 (Photo by the author)



Fig. 6. Rotterdam, Lijnbaan, 2006 (Photo by the author)

lective memory. Additionally, the neighbourhoods have to serve everyday needs perfectly and seek out opportunities for social network building. Meanwhile, urban and architectural solutions are needed to create, maintain or improve the environment's likability. Overall, positive image change can be accomplished if the urban regeneration process of large housing estates is guided by a complex sustainability approach based on these evaluation factors.

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