

Good Housing – an essential contribution to a higher quality of life in cities?

The URBACT II SUITE housing project and its connections to BHC

by Heidrun Feigelfeld, Lead Expert SUITE

With or without global crisis – having a stable, good and affordable place to live is a key factor in attaining a higher quality of life. There is a strong interaction with a stable employment situation, since job loss can easily result in loss of housing, which in turn complicates the way back into employment.

Especially the public authorities carry a big responsibility and it is their duty to deal with the often expensive consequences of misguided policies. For nine European cities this was an incentive to start an information exchange in order to learn from other cities, regions and countries how integrative housing policies might be worked out.

The goal of the URBACT II Network SUITE (The Housing Project – Social and Urban Inclusion through Housing) is highly ambitious – housing programmes and measure should not only be socially sustainable, but also sustainably affordable and eco-friendly on a long-term basis. The standard follows these three corners of a sustainability triangle; each idea, however, should also be analysed with respect to the question whether it can reach the peak of a sustainability pyramid in synergy with the other qualities. In light of the basic requirement of affordability the project centres on the housing sector, which is usually termed “social housing”. We are aware that this can mean very different things in different European countries.

How is this connected to the goals of a network like Building Healthy Communities?

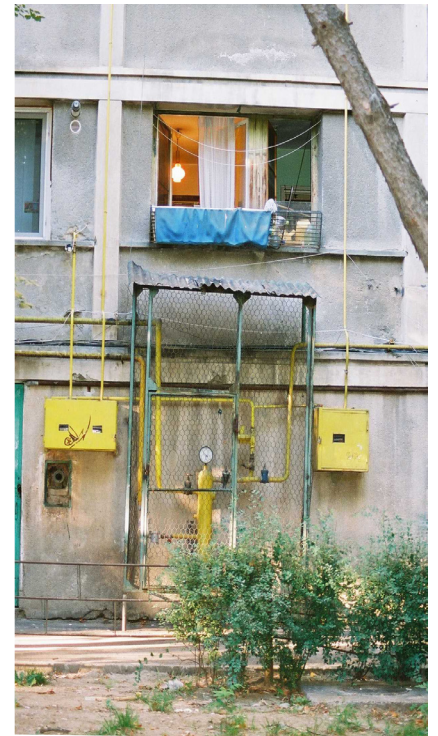
It is evident that housing can never be regarded as something reduced to just the flat or residential building. Neighbourhoods, areas and the city as a whole are just as important for the general

housing situation, which makes a holistic approach absolutely necessary. The high-quality flat as “island” in a deficient environment is of only dubious value.

This already became apparent in the discussion of the first focal point during the SUITE Project – social sustainability, where the question of social mix, its meaning, background, effectiveness and handling of such a tool stood in the center.

Furthermore, the discussion of the second focal point – economic sustainability – brought to light that the level of rent alone is not crucial, while a healthy, comfortable design of the flats at reasonable cost, as well as an affordable infrastructure of building and quarter have also to be taken into account.

The current preparations for the third focal workshop (Hamburg, 20-21 April) on environmental sustainability also show clearly that this criterion cannot be exhaustively dealt with through technical or construction measures on buildings. It is especially here that the broad spectrum of which quality of life and a healthy urban environment are composed of must come into play.



Because it is of fundamental importance to develop all this with the participation of residents/citizens, we try to strengthen their inclusion into the ULSG (URBACT Local Support Groups, which cooperate in the Local Action Plans).

All this demonstrates the evident cross linking and interferences with BHC's concepts. Our network is extremely interested in answering questions such as: Can this be measured? How can it be measured, evaluated, and which criteria can be feasible?

The two networks' convergence already dates from early projects: The first mutual interest and insight became manifest in December 2008, during the URBACT Annual Conference in Montpellier, where the two lead experts presented the projects together and discussed them with the audience.

This led both projects to be associated with the same "Thematic Pole" on URBACT's programme level - Cities and Integrated Sustainable Development - and subsequently to the development of a joint "Thematic Cloud" ("Quality Sustainable Living"). This "cloud" also includes the URBACT II Working Group HO-PUS (Housing Praxis for Urban Sustainability), which deals with the concept of "design coding" in housing, led by Sapienza University in Rome. Almost instantly, ideas for collaborative designs of products were developed.



The URBACT Annual Conference expanded the circle by joining SUITE and BHC with CONET - a network aimed at "Exploring current approaches to strengthen social cohesion in neighbourhoods" into a workshop. The lively discussion between the numerous participants clearly showed the cross linking of the different subjects and the broad acceptance for the goal of "quality sustainable living".

As you can see, there is great motivation to utilise the synergies resulting from the cross-links of these projects to better inform and inspire the respective partner cities, but also the wider URBACT community and other interested European cities. This is why it is a special pleasure for me, SUITE's Lead Expert Heidrun Feigelfeld, who has been working on evaluations and exchange about quality of life in cities for many years, to be invited to participate in the upcoming thematic workshop of BHC on "Healthy sustainable lifestyle" in Torino, Italy.

You can find more information about SUITE on the network's mini-website

<http://urbact.eu/en/projects/quality-sustainable-living/suite/homepage/> (Soon to be updated!).