

Dwellings and generational change in owner communities

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Abstract

The ecological, social and demographic change is a major challenge for suburban residents. Within a research project titled “Residential Property for Generations” a specific form of suburban area with privately owned homes in owner communities was analysed. By means of organised group self-help, the future homeowners took part in the building of their homes with thousands of working hours each. Most of these settlements were founded in the 1950th and 60th and are characterized by small houses, huge gardens for self-supporters and small stables for chickens, rabbits or pigs. The families created strong neighbourhoods and tight communication structures, bundled in clubs and associations.

The objective of the research project was to investigate if these owner communities may easier cope with urgent future tasks than other suburban residential areas, although inhabitants grew significantly older. The question is how neighbourly help, the modernisation of buildings to meet modern standards, or the generation change is managed. Within the research project inhabitants of five owner communities in Rhineland-Palatinate were analysed and advised in terms of the solution of future tasks. A survey on housing conditions, neighbourhood, and social activities as well as a participative processes “Zukunftswerkstatt” (foresight) were conducted.

Results show that inhabitants of these dwellings have strong bonds towards their homes, strong neighbourhoods still exist, and help is given to single handed elderlies. On the other hand investments in buildings are deferred to future generations. Two thirds would like to pass on the dwelling to their offspring, but in fact houses are sold on the market, because parents, children and grandchildren live in different places.

Rhineland-Palatine as a rural state in Germany focuses on home owners as actor to preserve resources and save energy. The project was funded to analyze to which degree these owners show a higher affinity towards energetic modernization than typical single home owners. Despite information, guidance and advice in the context of the research project, the constellation of the single family remained in the centre of decisions. In the same time participation processes supplied evidence that these seniors engage very actively in their neighborhood. Still these seniors (61 years old in average) take matters into their own hands and form an active part in their city – unfortunately this potential often is unrealized. In this regard the examples are good examples that could be regarded as a role model.

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1. Introduction

In the postwar decades with their increasing affluence for the population, residential property developed particularly on the outskirts of cities, in the communities surrounding towns or in rural areas. These small expansions of communities happened in several stages by adding detached one family houses and are regarded as the prototype for urban development of owner-occupied homes in the Federal Republic. (Jessen, Simon, 2001, p. 353). With the increasing age of the residents and the homes, these homeowner communities are currently facing great challenges. As the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR) points out in a study, the quarters of the 1960s and 1970s with their high percentage of single family homes is not as such problematic. But due to the quality of this kind of urban housing with its poor infrastructure and the expected demographic development, this type of dwelling will be facing various challenges in the years to come (BBSR, 2009, p. 18). Current challenges and future tasks of areas dominated by detached family homes include energy conservation, adjusting the buildings to modern needs, ensuring that seniors are adequately provided for, plus coping with the generation change.

This essay will present the results of the practice-based research project "Residential Property for Generations. Sustainable Development for Owner Communities", in which a particular kind of residential community was studied. In those communities, the future residents organized mutual support groups to construct their homes. Five of these homeowner communities organized in the Verband Wohneigentum (homeownership association) Rhineland-Palatinate were observed in detail and counseled regarding the solution of future tasks.

1.1 Owner Communities in Transition

The movement for single-family home ownership goes back to the year 1918. In order to improve the living conditions of the poorer population and low middle class, the state passed a number of laws (e.g. Reichsheimstättengesetz - Reich homestead law of 1920) thus providing the prerequisites for the construction of small residential estates and small residences. During the early years of the homestead and small holding movement veterans, people disabled or damaged by the war, war widows as well as families with many children were the target group for establishing healthier living conditions. Apart from participating in the construction of homes, self-subsistence through cultivating gardens and keeping small domestic animals was an important issue of the residential movement. The communities are therefore characterized by comparatively small houses, annexes to the buildings and large gardens (Hafner, 1996, pp. 559-561; Kuhn, 2001, p. 195; Rauch, 2010, p. 21). During the Weimar Republic, however, only about 20,000 such properties were realized (Hafner, 1996, p. 559).

Even during the reign of the National Socialists, such small communities were established. However, the focus of construction activities shifted from large cities to small and middle sized communities in sparsely populated areas or regions close to borders. Gardening and keeping small animals played an important role in terms of subsistence economy. In general, the housing policy of the National Socialists aimed at (re-)rooting the people. In contrast to the propaganda (100,000 privately owned homes annually), only a total of 140,000 such homes were built (Harlander, 2001, p. 261). In the "Third Reich", these small housing estates and homesteads became an important part of the Nazi family ideology and they were placed in the context of the national socialist blood and soil ideology. During this period, the small estate and homestead movement opened up towards the middle class in order to raise private funds. In addition, racial issues and party membership played a role in the selection of the future homeowners (Hafner, 1996, pp. 584-585; Harlander, 2001, pp. 258-259).

During the times of housing shortages in the 1950s and 1960s, the construction of small suburban residential areas boomed, building on the traditions of the Weimar Republic. After the war, organized mutual support was a prerequisite for lower and middle-income groups to be able to afford homeownership. For setting up the usually standardized, compact homes in the suburbs, the future owners had to make a personal contribution, which often amounted to 1,500 to 2,500 hours of construction work. The planning and construction of the suburban residences was handled by a builder, frequently a residents association or nonprofit building societies. Through mutual support, the future residents often established close contacts before even moving in, resulting in strong ties with the place and close neighborhood relationships (Hafner, 1996, pp. 567-568; Jessen, Simon, 2001, p. 356; Szypulski, 2008, pp. 117-118). In 1935, the "Deutscher Siedlerbund" (German Settler association) was recognized as the sole representative of all homeowners. In 2005, it was renamed Verband Wohneigentum (homeownership society), as the term "Siedler" (settler) had almost vanished in spoken German – at least in the context of living in the Federal Republic. It now focused on the future. The Verband Wohneigentum currently has 370,00 members, making it the largest association of homeowners in Germany, and it supports the funding for constructing and acquiring homes and ensures that owner occupied homeownership is preserved.

As in other areas dominated by single-family homes, the owner communities organized in the Verband Wohneigentum are facing major challenges. The one and two family homes of its members are for the most part only insufficiently equipped with amenities for the needs of their aging residents. When the homes were built, the speedy creation of living quarters had top priority; living standards appropriate for old age were not an issue. Therefore, many of the existing homes in these residential communities have an increased need for modernization if one wants to meet standards appropriate for seniors (Szubin, 2009). In addition, the homes need to be adapted to modern energy standards.

In many homeowner communities, a generation change will take place shortly or has already begun.

As there are currently no new communities built on organized mutual support, local residents associations and owner communities are facing new tasks. The percentage of first time home owners will dwindle steadily due to age, and new home owners, without the experience of mutual support groups during the construction phase, will have to be integrated into existing communities. In addition, there is a trend that owner communities regard themselves as institutions for consumer rights. They provide legal and financial counseling, and give advice on gardening, energy efficiency and barrier-free living. Other important future tasks of residents associations are (Uertz, 2010, p. 17): preventing vacancies, improving the living quality in the residential areas, strengthening local networks, as well as joint economizing (e.g. purchasing cooperatives or sharing equipment and facilities).

2. Background and rationale

As in more typical suburban areas, the owner communities, organized in the association "Verband Wohneigentum", are facing major challenges. Many inhabitants of the first generation live in their houses for decades – people and houses, both grew older, resulting in a homogenous, quite old age structure of residents. Offsprings themselves count about 50 years of age and live in their own houses and in different areas. And second-hand single-family-homes exceed the number of households which are likely to buy them, because in Germany the fertility of the population dropped far below replacement level. These kinds of dwellings probably are not accepted any longer. In most cases they were enlarged, but many require investments, need reconfigurations and reconstructions. Time consuming garden maintenance may be an obstacle as well.

The key question of the project was, if this kind of living – very traditional on one hand but very modern on the other hand – can be a role-model to solve problems of "normal" suburban areas, such as social engagement, overcoming lack of services or energetic modernization. We analyzed these settlements from a variety of viewpoints, including ecologic, economic, social and urban development considerations.

- Social aspects: The percentage of first time home owners will decrease steadily due to cohort effects. New home owners, without the experience of mutual support and construction will have to be integrated into existing communities. Are neighborhoods negatively affected? Are residents able to interact adequately and integrate new population groups, new households in different stages in their lifecycle, different values and lifestyles?

- Economic viewpoint: Are the settlements at risk of abandonment, deterioration and devaluation? Do the owner communities face problems like vacancies?
- Urban development: Political actors and spatial planners try to reduce land consumption and strengthen existing settlements. We wanted to know if these quite homogenously built houses, as well as compact and green quarters can be preserved - despite generation change, problems of infrastructure and possibilities for redensification.
- Ecological viewpoint: The project was funded to analyze to which degree these owners show a higher affinity towards energetic modernization than typical single home owners. Finally, they are used to collaborative construction work - maybe residents think about economy of scale.

The aim was to work on concepts and strategies for future development of these owner communities together with the inhabitants. Active participation and willingness to act during the process were crucial for success in this applied research project. It was conducted by a team of sociologists, ecologists and urban planners from the University of Kaiserslautern. ² Social aspects are in the focus of this paper.

2.1 Methods

The project concentrated on five communities (Figure 1), located in the cities Boppard, Lahnstein, Wittlich and Worms as well as in the smaller village Waldböckelheim (county Bad Kreuznach).

Figure 1. Pictures of owner communities:



Public Green in
Wittlich



Original structures
in Boppard



Missing infrastructure
in Lahnstein

In the empirical research, mixed methods were combined: In December 2009 a standardized survey on housing, satisfaction with housing conditions, neighborhood, activities and generation change was conducted. In Lahnstein oral interviews were added. Needs, potentials and deficits within the

² We are indebted to the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Environment of Rhineland-Palatinate who financed the project. Thanks a lot also to the head of the association "Verband Wohneigentum", working as gatekeeper in the project.

settlements could be identified. Furthermore, a workshop in each community took place: "How shall our neighborhood look like in 20 years?" in order to develop projects according to specific needs (Spring 2010). In a third step expert talks with local politicians and planning departments were conducted, in order to get information on the municipal perspective (Autumn 2010). And finally, we collected data on a fine-grained regional or municipal basis. Here, I will concentrate on the survey and some impressions of the participation processes.

3. Results

3.1 Survey on housing, neighborhood, and social activities

All of the households (n=528) got an information sheet in advance, followed by a standardized questionnaire "Living in owner communities". 233 persons participated in the survey, which means a satisfying return rate of 44 %. In Worms 33 % sent the questionnaire back, whereas in Lahnstein 74 % did so, reflecting different interest levels.

The average age of respondents was 61 years, with a range from 27 to 90 years. These home owners are much older than the average of the population (43 years). According to the higher age groups, most of the respondents live alone (14 %) or as a couple (57 %) in their homes. Dependent children live only in one out of five households (average in Germany). More men (63 %) than women (37 %) answered, who eventually felt as head of the household more often. The educational and income levels are quite disperse, 39 % finished school with a lower degree and 36 % with the highest level "Abitur". Within older persons lower levels dominate, whereas in younger age groups higher levels can be found. This result can be interpreted as a first indicator for the attractiveness of these settlements for the middle classes.

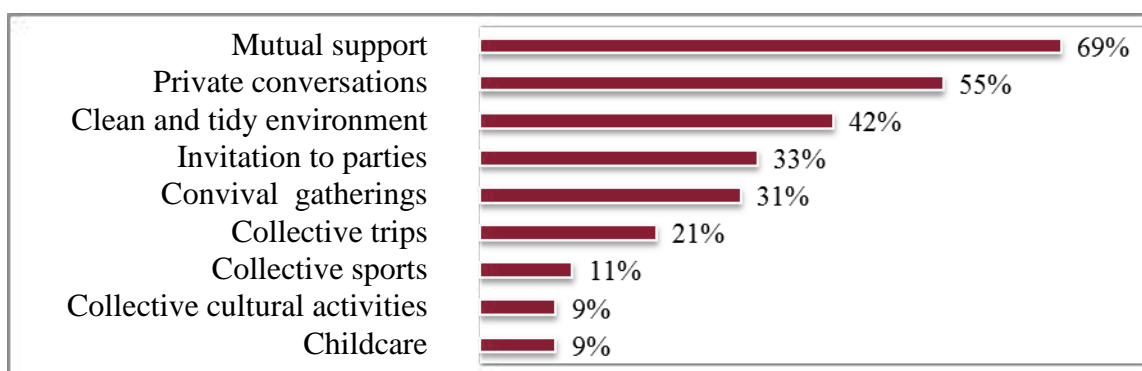
According to the age structure a generation change takes place, depending on construction age, having reached the oldest of settlements. New inhabitants move in with different lifestyles, habits and experiences. This may affect the neighborhood, common activities, and civil engagement. The question "Did you buy, inherit or built your house yourself?" aimed towards generation change (Table 1).

Table 1. How did you or your family get your house?

	Total	In single settlements
Built myself	51 %	Boppard: 46 %; Lahnstein: 89 %; Waldböckelheim: 82 %; Wittlich 17 %; Worms 32 %
Bought	36 %	
Inherited	13 %	

Still, half of the residents built their homes by themselves. One third bought it and 13 % got it by heritage. In Lahnstein nearly each respondent is member of the first generation of owners, whereas in Wittlich, which was founded in the 1930s, the generation change took place already. Only five out of 23 built the house themselves. Two thirds would like to pass on the dwelling to their offspring, but in fact houses more often are sold on the market, because children and grandchildren live in different places. This is a crucial factor, why investments in buildings are deferred to future residents.

Table 2. Activities with neighbors

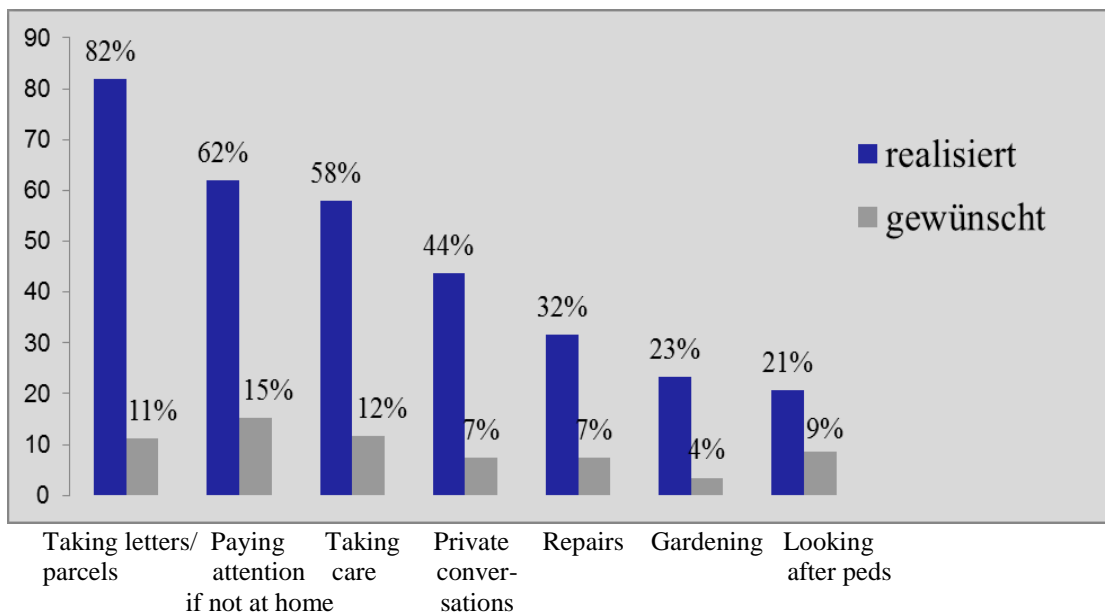


Neighborhood and community are an important potential for mutual support (Table 2). Strong neighborhoods are very much demanded because of the ageing population and lack of services in cities and villages. On the individual level good neighborhoods are regarded as central for individual integration and social cohesion.

More than half of the residents see their neighbors daily or several times a week. Three quarters say, neighborhood is as vital as it was decades ago, which is seen as an important factor for quality of life. These bonds support neighborly help, as the figure shows. More than two thirds pronounce mutual help, more than 50 % talk to each other on a very personal basis, four persons out of five look for secure and proper environments.

But if you ask people, which support they like from their neighbors, you face the situation that normally they do not want to depend on their direct neighbors (Table 3). Most people in Germany like a friendly, helpful, but more distant neighborhood. Professional services are preferred more often, because they don't violate the principle of reciprocity and help to avoid the feeling of shame, when people can't give back what they get from neighbors.

Table 3. Neighborly support: What they do and what they like



These settlements organize themselves in clubs. Nowadays, only one third of the residents are active member of the “settlers’ club” – the typical form of community in these suburbs. Half of the respondents support the opinion that these clubs are important, but one third is only a passive member or no member at all. The importance of these clubs is higher in neighborhoods with first owners and accordingly in higher age groups (40 % of the older respondents are active member, but only 20 % of the younger ones).

This kind of suburb has a long lasting tradition, but modernization has taken place. Leisure activities highlight the modernization of these suburbs. Most frequently the homeowners spend their time with computers, 47 % use them on a daily basis, followed by visits of relatives, friends or neighbors. Handicraft, doing arts or visiting theaters are quite uncommon.

Facing the pluralization of life styles and leisure activities, it is more difficult to organize activities suitable for many. The association “Verband Wohneigentum” is facing the task of having to recruit new members who are less interested in existing communities than in individual benefits and “elective affinities”.

Accordingly, company, fun, doing something together and personal activity are the main motives to participate in active engagement for the settlers’ club.

Altruistic motives like solving problems or felt responsibility for the community are not mentioned.

First Conclusion:

The five communities studied are characterized by active neighborhood support and diverse communal activities. However, it can be observed that neighborhoods, due to the generation change, are now frequently understood in a neutral and pragmatic manner, similar to other suburban residential areas. It

is therefore not surprising that younger people are less interested in an owner community than older people. Community is often perceived as something you share with other individual residents who have similar interests, i.e. activities are more likely to take place with individuals or small groups. In larger residential areas it is generally not easy to maintain the social cohesion. Civil engagement in clubs can be found if people like companionship and recognize an increase in personal happiness and subjective wellbeing.

3.2 Participation processes: Perspectives of owner communities

Figure 2. Participation process



This form of participation process, called "Zukunftswerkstatt" (foresight) is divided in three parts, a phase of critique on actual living conditions, a utopian phase and a phase, in which concrete projects are developed. Residents of the owner communities discussed weaknesses and chances of the suburbs under the motto "How shall our neighborhood look like in twenty years?".

In one community a roofed place came to the fore, in another a meeting point with café was discussed, in a third traffic problems came up, in a fourth, communication and information were seen as weak points. And in Lahnstein – the oldest but most active community mobile services, a place to play boule and a citizens' bus or dial a bus service shall be installed. The community got in contact with nexus-institute (Berlin; cooperation supported by the Ministry of Economy RLP to implement citizens' buses). They spread out information and organized a meeting and a discussion with the city council. Despite all efforts, politicians rejected the plans – for unknown reasons besides expected disturbance and disorder.

In May 2012 the author and the team of researches evaluate the ongoing processes and the effect of the project. Besides we include three more settlements to compare those communities with others that got no input from academics.

4. Conclusion

Owner communities were created at a time of need to provide the poorer classes with family friendly housing. Joining them entailed considerable

personal contributions towards the construction of the homes and a commitment to self-subsistence by operating kitchen gardens and keeping small animals. Many of the floor plans have been adapted to the changed needs and the gardens are now considered a hobby, in keeping with their initial concept of providing a place for self-fulfillment, physical activity, as well as shaping and expressing esthetic concepts.

The high standard of quality of life in the owner communities studied here results in a high degree of satisfaction with the living conditions. Vacancies are thus quickly filled because of the way the communities were planned with their open private and public spaces, which in turn are associated with opportunities for personal development, so that, despite the relative age of the houses, there are no sustained vacancies to be observed. An aging population and having to cope with the generation change is a key challenge for many owner communities but so far this has not been a central issue in the residents associations.

Workshops for developing ideas for the future have shown that particularly the older owners are very active in developing new ideas and realizing them. Older people in communities have a potential that can inspire communities – if there is organizational support. Experts rate the feasibility of project ideas developed in those workshops as high. In addition, the representatives of local administrations and local politics have promised to support the realization of various projects.

Raising the awareness of various communal and statewide political actors for the owner communities was among the objectives of the ExWoSt-Project „Wohneigentum für Generationen“ (homeownership for generations). On a state and federal level, the project made an impact with a final symposium where experts lectured on suburbanization and energetic sanitizing and presented their own project findings. The relevance of the topic was underlined with the minister of Rhineland-Palatinate in charge of financing and construction (Dr. Carsten Kühl) and the mayor of Koblenz (Marie-Theres Hammes-Rosenstein) who both gave brief welcoming speeches. The entire board of the Verband Wohneigentum was present as well as city representatives for the owner communities and owners.

The special case of “owner communities“ exemplifies that practical and political actors on different levels are dealing with the project’s issues, especially with the sustainable development of individual properties and certain suburban residential areas, as well as the future of honorary volunteer work. Rhineland-Palatinate, characterized by its rural environment, focuses on owner occupied homes as an energetically sustainable housing stock. The project was funded with the aim of finding out whether organized owners were more likely to carry out energetic sanitation work than owners in classic residential areas. As it turned out, despite the information, counseling and help provided in the framework of the research project, the owners’ personal situation, even in owner communities, is of greatest importance. Despite favorable conditions in the communities, such as mutual support in the neighborhood, organizations

and associations, the individual financial scope as well as the age and the family circumstances determine the concrete willingness to act, and only to a lesser degree the life in a comparatively homogenous community. The project also demonstrated that owners of homes - even at a higher age - are very active and committed to supporting their area of residence. This potential includes a large, hardly called upon potential for new ideas and their realization. Thus the selected case studies might function as a role model.

Lessons learned looking at sustainability:

- Inhabitants of these dwellings have strong bonds towards their homes, strong neighborhoods still exist, and help is given to single handed elderlies.
- An aging population and generation change is a key challenge for many owner communities but so far this has not been a central issue in the residents associations.
- Foresight workshops have shown that the older owners are very active in developing new ideas and realizing them. Older people in communities have a potential that can inspire communities - if there is organizational support. These seniors (61 years old in average) take matters into their own hands and form an active part in their city - unfortunately this potential often is unrealized.
- In the same time, the association and clubs are changing: More and more owner communities regard themselves as institutions for consumer rights, not as active neighborhoods. They provide legal and financial counseling and give advice on gardening. Some communities fall apart and change into a usual suburb. Larger communities face the biggest problems and those with very old-fashioned actors.
- Because of place identity and place building the residents want to pass over their dwellings, but in fact that are unrealistic plans. At least they maintain family capital by selling the property.
- On some roofs we find solar panels, new heating systems were installed, old windows replaced, etc., but only a few owners started energetic modernization.
- To sum up, place making, place identity and strong social bonds are the main assets of these settlements. It takes some time, financial support and some effort, until owner occupied homes form a substantial part of an energetically sustainable housing stock.

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