



OPTIMISTIC SUBURBIA 2

Middle-Class Mass Housing Complexes

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Exploratory Talks as a Tool for Co-Diagnosis.

Comparative Analysis of Residential Neighbourhoods in New Belgrade & Almere Haven

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ABSTRACT

[Intro] The paper introduces a participatory tool for assessment of the Middle-Class Mass Housing (MCMH) in Europe that was simultaneously applied in two studies, on the two cases New Belgrade (Serbia) and Almere Haven (The Netherlands). The studies were exploring the values, problems and opportunities of these residential neighbourhoods through the eyes of their residents.

[Method] A comparative analysis reveals contrasting and complementary aspects of the two cases. Exploratory interviews and surveys were used to collect testimonies of residents, informing the method of assessment (co-diagnosis) in residential neighbourhoods. By applying the same tool and comparing results, the paper contributes to a validation of this method for research on MCMH neighbourhoods in different regions and for different MCMH typologies and scales.

[Result] The paper highlights some main themes of residents' analysis of their neighbourhood's strengths and weaknesses. Aspects discussed are, among others, deterioration (technical, functional, social), sense of community, place attachment, maintenance and taking care, ownership and appropriation, quality of public spaces and green areas, satisfaction and comfort. Both researches are still in development, but some preliminary conclusions can be sketched. Although both cases were built in the same decades (1970s-80s), they seem to hold opposite architectural and urban characteristics. New Belgrade is composed of modernist blocks with mass housing types in a high-rise urban pattern with mainly collective green spaces. Almere Haven is a suburban low-rise pattern and consists of a wide variety of typologies, materials and a range of private, collective and public green spaces. However, the residents' opinions and assessments show many similarities, regarding the themes they address and the values and problems they identify.

[Value for MCMH] The paper illustrates the diversity of MCMH in two different European regions and projects, identifying the broad scope that is needed to assess MCMH. Moreover, the method of exploratory talks with residents is identified as an important participatory tool within the broader analytical framework for MCMH neighbourhoods.

Keywords: Co-diagnosis; New Belgrade; Almere Haven.

INTRODUCTION

The middle-class mass housing (MCMH) areas in Europe have for a long time received very little attention since most of the studies on housing favoured either the theme of high-class single-family houses or the other extreme, social housing for low-income families (Milheiro et al. 2018, 44). Nevertheless, MCMH is an emerging research topic in recent studies in several European countries and is further receiving more attention internationally. Aiming to contribute to the emerging discussion and existing knowledge on MCMH, the paper presents a comparative study on two examples of MCMH in Europe: New Belgrade (Serbia) and Almere Haven (The Netherlands).



Fig.1 – Two case studies: Almere Haven, Netherlands and New Belgrade, Serbia. Illustration by the authors, adapted from <http://www.bing.com/maps>, accessed on 23 January 2018 and 29 June 2020.

New Belgrade is the biggest municipality of the Serbian capital Belgrade. Basically, it is a city within the city with around 250.000 inhabitants. It was planned in the 1950s just after WWII as *the capital city* of the newly founded socialist Yugoslavia, but largely constructed in 1960s and 1970s as a *housing city*, composed of modernist mega blocks in a high-rise urban pattern. The constantly changing socio-political context caused discontinuity in planning, building and maintaining the housing area, eventually resulting in decay and disrepair, especially of the common spaces.

Almere had to become the antithesis of the modernist model, the city that was different from the Amsterdam Bijlmer (Provoost, 1999, 13). New town Almere should be more human, representing a general shift of Dutch planning ideals in the early 1970s, strongly influenced by architects and planners related to Team 10. Almere Haven is the oldest core in the polycentric urban layout. It was built from the 1970s onwards, on new polder land. Its suburban low-rise pattern was inspired by traditional Dutch harbour towns and the organic human scale concept of the 'woonerf'. Almere is based on small scale but has grown into a city for over 200.000 inhabitants.

Although the two residential neighbourhoods were built in the same decades, they seem to hold opposite architectural and urban characteristics. As indicated above, the ideologies that formed the basis of Almere Haven can even be interpreted as a countermovement to the urbanism of New Belgrade. Nevertheless, the comparative analysis will show many similarities, regarding the values, problems and potentials that were identified and are to be addressed in further research.

This paper explores the values, problems and opportunities of these residential neighbourhoods, through the eyes of their residents. It is based on the assumption that residents are the experts in assessing the quality of living environments. The inclusion of citizens in the co-diagnosis and co-creation processes can be seen as a trend in local communities and national policies. Also, on European level, the Faro Convention¹ advocates people-centred processes as an essential part of development, in which “everyone’s opinion, interests and aspirations counts” (Council-of-Europe 2005,10).

1. RESEARCH PROCESS AND METHODS

In the first phase of the research, thematic frameworks and research methods were defined independently for each case. Focusing on the two different case studies, this phase was done in parallel by the researchers², resulting in a complementary setting. Second, the empirical research focussed on the exploration of the two case studies. Exploratory interviews and surveys were used to collect testimonies of residents, informing the method of assessment (co-diagnosis) in residential neighbourhoods. Third, a comparative analysis of the two studies revealed contrasting and complementary aspects of the two MCMH cases.

1.1. Thematic framework and research methods

Being part of the broader MCMH thematic framework, the research explores values, problems and opportunities by using exploratory talks as a method of participatory assessment (co-diagnosis). The use of anthropological-ethnographic methods is used by several disciplines relating to evaluate the built environment. In the heritage assessment, various techniques are applied, like transect walks, behavioural mapping, focus group interviews (Low 2002, 38-39). In the architecture and history discipline, oral history as a research method is gaining ground (Gosseye, Stead, Van der Plaats, 2019). By application and testing this participatory tool, we aim to contribute to more inclusive methods of neighbourhood evaluation and development.

1.2. Empirical research – two case studies

The two researches as parallel, yet independent, studies use different techniques. However, they share the methodological approach of consulting individual residents to identify qualities of their living environment.

The study on New Belgrade applied the method of exploratory semi-structured interviews. The questions, or rather topics for discussion, were previously designed in a workshop with Master students at the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Architecture. The questions were pre-tested in an interview simulation with a guest expert. The test-interview helped with refining the questions/topics. In this way, the students were also trained on how to conduct the interviews with the residents. Moreover, the researcher trained the students on how to identify and select the interviewees. The research process followed: preparatory talks and selection of the interviewees, the on-site interviews (48 interviews), organisation and analysis of the collected material, representation and visualisation.

¹ The Faro Convention is a treaty whereby European countries agree to protect cultural heritage and the rights of citizens to access and participate in that heritage.

² The study on New Belgrade is part of the ongoing PhD researches, see acknowledgements.

In the specific method for Almere Haven, informants were asked to keep a diary, responding to two questions or assignments per day, for one week. Completion of the diary notes is done by the participants independently, and 55 diaries were returned and completed. The questions and assignments include aspects of the urban scale and architectural scale, relating to the living environment of the individual resident. Respondents are residents of Almere-Haven and were approached by encounters in public space, snowball method (a respondent suggests or recruits others) and two group meetings with children and elderly.



Fig.2 – a) Almere Haven (left), Photography © Lidwine Spoormans 2018; b) New Belgrade (right), Photography © Zorana Jovic, Student Workshop, Belgrade, 2020.

1.3. Comparative analysis

The analysis of the collected material that was done independently by each researcher after each study is not subject of this paper. This paper focuses on the comparative analysis of the collected testimonies of the residents in the two studies. Based on the collected testimonies of the residents, a set of parameters for comparative analysis was defined: social cohesion, community centres, facilities, ownership, taking care, public and green spaces, aesthetics and living histories. Within each category, the statements of the residents from the two neighbourhoods were correlated.

This stage is revealing contrasting and complementary aspects of the two MCMH cases. The approach represents an important contribution to the existing analytical framework for assessment of the MCMH, and for residential neighbourhoods in general. It validates the research method proving its applicability to the different examples of MCMH neighbourhoods in different regions and for different MCMH typologies and scales.

2. RESULTS

A comparative overview of the residents' testimonies, that were collected during the empirical part of the research, are presented in this chapter. Each theme, or parameters of the comparative analysis, are separately studied, and summarized in a final graphic (Fig. 4).

2.1. Social cohesion

Residents from both neighbourhoods value social cohesion with their neighbours very high. Children are often a natural connection, as a resident explains: “Kids are all the time outside, and then you meet people. You are simply directed towards the centre of the block, onto that one park, that shop, school, and that’s where you meet your neighbours all the time.” (resident, New Belgrade). Social cohesion has also organisational benefits: “I do have contact with my neighbours. Not because it is fun, but for practical reasons. Six or seven neighbours would alarm if my curtains don’t open in the morning.” (resident, Almere Haven). This way, social connections can provide social safety.

2.2. Community centres

Community centres are very important places to facilitate communication and collectivity. In New Belgrade, their disappearance has an impact on the residents: “The community centres had the importance, but they are systematically destroyed by taking the rights and budget step by step. That is a big issue.” (resident, New Belgrade). The collective courtyards, which are present in low-rise neighbourhoods of Almere Haven as well, have a similar community function nowadays. Therefore, it is important for these spaces to be safe and accessible.

2.3. Facilities

Close proximity of shops and other facilities is important for the daily lives of residents. In New Belgrade residents appreciate the high level of amenities: “Well, you have everything you need here in the block, kindergarten, schools, shops, bakeries, pharmacies, health facilities and a dentist.” (resident, New Belgrade). The importance is also felt in Almere Haven, but here residents “are worried about the vacancy of stores. Many convenience stores and specialty stores are disappearing.” (resident, Almere Haven). So, in the low-rise neighbourhood of Almere Haven retail is declining, whereas the high density of New Belgrade makes that facilities can keep up.

2.4. Feeling of ownership

Residents mention the lack of responsibility for the environment as a problem. The feeling of ownership of collective property is declining. Especially in the high-rise blocks in New Belgrade the distinction between individual and collective ownership is problematic, expressed by a resident: “The residents are mainly the owners as well. A few are renting the flats. [...] But then a big issue of not knowing what’s yours and what’s collective emerged.” (resident, New Belgrade). Feeling of ownership over private property in the low-rise neighbourhoods with dominance of single-family homes, make this distinction easier: “My own garden is my favourite place.” (resident, Almere Haven).

2.5. Taking care

Both neighbourhoods still have first or early inhabitants, who observe a decline in taking care and collective spirit. This can relate to the beforementioned maintenance and feeling of ownership. A New Belgrade resident said: “People simply could not understand that the building is a common space, and that it should be collectively managed and maintained. They understand that they should maintain their flat, but not the building. That is the reason for today’s physical condition of the buildings.” (resident, New Belgrade). In other cases, residents share interest in maintenance and taking care of the collective, like in a street in Almere Haven: “I have regular contact with neighbours, especially 'people like me'. Together we are taking care that the street looks neat and we borrow each other's broom.” (resident, Almere Haven).

2.6. Public and green spaces

Green areas and playgrounds are the absolute winners in public space (Fig. 3). However, the type of space, the layout and programming make a difference. Apart from the extensive park-like areas with mature greenery, especially the smaller scale public places integrated in the residential neighbourhoods are appreciated. “No one has time or initiative to do something in the collective spaces. Only the kids’ playgrounds are important for us.” (resident, New Belgrade). So again, children are often drivers, as expressed by a young participant in Almere Haven as well: “We have two courtyards, one with a playground and one with a garden. I like the courtyards because they are next to my house and it is where I meet my friends. It is nice to have a lot of freedom to imagine games to play.” (resident, Almere Haven). In future developments, public green spaces are key values in spatial terms, enabling social contact and feelings of freedom.



Fig.3 – a) Almere Haven (left), Photography © Lidwine Spoomans, 2018; b) New Belgrade (right), Photography © Zorana Jovic, Student Workshop, Belgrade, 2020.

2.7. Aesthetic

The brutalist architecture of New Belgrade starts to be appreciated. Several residents here express positive opinions, like: “To be honest, I find the contrast grey concrete - greenery very appealing.” (resident New Belgrade). The ordinary atmosphere in Almere, on the other hand, is not generally recognised as aesthetically valuable. As a resident in Almere Haven explained: “There are no beautiful neighbourhoods in Almere. In old cities like Alkmaar or Amsterdam, of course they are beautiful. But not in Almere, everything is very ordinary here.” (resident Almere Haven).

2.8. Living histories

Although both neighbourhoods are relatively young, childhood memories as living histories play an important role in the legacy of the neighbourhoods. A child in Almere Haven, being proud of his neighbourhood, said: “My father grew up here. I know that my house and my neighbourhood are very old.” (resident, Almere Haven). A New Belgrade resident said: “It was great for me to grow up here, as the level of freedom in New Belgrade was very high.” (resident, New Belgrade). These strong feelings of belonging, of both first inhabitants, children and newcomers, should not be neglected.

2.9. Synthesis

Although the parameters for comparative analysis were the same, they were differently evaluated in both neighbourhoods as shown in the graphic (Fig. 4). The comparative analysis highlights some main themes of

residents' analysis of their neighbourhood's strengths and weaknesses. Social cohesion, community centres or courtyards, green spaces and living histories are highly valued in both cities. Facilities and aesthetics are higher valued in New Belgrade. Feeling of ownership and taking care are better appreciated in Almere Haven, composed of single-family homes mainly. A decline in taking care and increased deterioration (technical, functional, social) could be correlated with a declining feeling (or, in case of New Belgrade, also legal status) of ownership. Sense of community and place attachment, that are highly valued and important for the residents, could be main drivers of change. Furthermore, the public spaces and green areas are recognised as spatial value and as potential spaces for interventions that would increase residents' comfort and satisfaction with the neighbourhood.

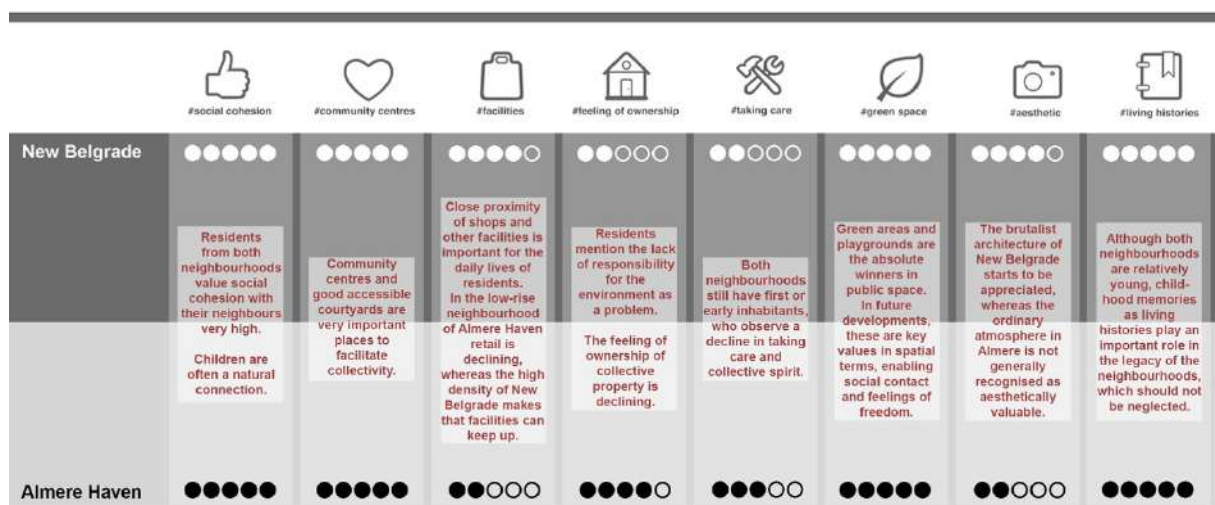


Fig.4 – Comparative analysis of the two neighbourhoods as recognised by their residents. Illustration by the authors.

3. OUTLOOK

The themes that result from the exploratory talks are sometimes different, identifying certain weaknesses and strengths of urban characteristics of the two neighbourhoods. However, generally the residents seem to attach importance to the same aspects of the living environment. One can argue that aspects such as public green spaces, facilities and social cohesion are not specific for the case studies in this research but general conditions for liveable neighbourhoods. However, this does not make them less relevant. It underpins the importance of involving residents in co-diagnosing problems and values. The method of exploratory talks with residents is identified as a valuable and operational participatory tool within the broader analytical framework for MCMH neighbourhoods.

As illustrated, the method is valuable for a diversity of MCMH in different European regions and projects, identifying the broad scope that is needed to assess these neighbourhoods. The authors aim to apply the method to further neighbourhoods and cities to validate the results obtained in New Belgrade and Almere Haven and thus contributing to a better understanding of European MCMH. We hope to inspire other researchers to join.

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