Early integration of the user’s perspective in the renovation process: Experiences from an “In-depth Dialogue Process with Residents” in rental flats from the 1950s

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Abstract: An “In-depth dialogue with residents” has been applied in the pre-study of a renovation of a housing area from 1950s with about 500 rental flats. The paper presents the result from this dialogue process and discusses the potential of the methodology to achieve a more integrated, sustainable renovation. The process was carried out by a transdisciplinary team with representatives from the housing manager, an architect firm with competences in sociology, the tenant organization, and researchers from architecture and environmental psychology. The dialogue process comprised four main activities: design of process and selection of tools, data collection, compilation of material and feedback to residents and housing company, and a following-up. Data about the residents view were collected by intercept interviews, a questionnaire survey, a walking tour, and a focus group interview. The dialogue process identified values appreciated by the residents and had impact on alternative renovation option for the flats.

Keywords: Dialogue process, Housing qualities, Stakeholder involvement, Sustainable renovation

Background and aim

One of the housing stocks in urgent need of renovation is the housing stock from the period 1940s-60s. Housing owners face a task which is urgent from a technical point of view and complex in terms of meeting regulations, economic return of investment, safeguarding architectural, cultural and social values and creating long-term sustainability. Strengthened energy objectives or un-sufficient knowledge about the social aspects, housing qualities etc. can lead to the replacement of still functioning components but also to irrevocable losses of cultural and social qualities. Thus, there is a need to find integrated solutions for renovation.

In order to address social issues, to reach different sustainability goals, and to involve more stakeholder groups and make use of their influence beyond regulations, participatory processes are increasingly integrated into urban planning processes and transformation processes of neighbourhoods [1, 2]. Stakeholders who might be able to have impact on or be affected of a transformation process, have insight into the process and have possibility to actually influence the process are involved. In renovation the focus is often on housing districts with social problems constructed during the period of the 1960-70s. It is of interest to
study how such a dialogue process could be integrated and contribute to an ordinary renovation process in housing districts from the 1950s.

The aim of this paper is to a) present the result from a participatory process started in the pre-study phase of a renovation of blocks of flats from the peoples’ home period and b) to discuss the potential of the methodology to achieve an integrated, sustainable renovation. The intention with the process was to make residents more conscious about the renovation, to build consensus around it and influence how it should be carried out. A further intention was to identify crucial issues early in the process and, from the housing companies’ view, to minimize the risk that important questions are forgotten.

The district Långängen

The housing area, district Långängen in Gothenburg, is in need of renovation. The area is situated close to the city centre (Figure 1) and neighbour to a development area. The buildings were constructed in the beginning of the 1950s with a typical architectural expression from that period. The district comprises about 870 flats; most of the flats, about 501, are managed by a municipally owned housing company. Half of the flats have a combined living room/bedroom, a kitchen and a bathroom, and the remainder have 1 or 2 bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen and a bathroom. The district has no social problems. A long-term goal of the housing company is to develop Långängen to an attractive and safe housing environment seen from different stakeholders’ interests and prerequisites.

The district was partly renovated in 1985–95 without architectural considerations. Today, the district is in need of new and more holistic renovation works. The housing manager had good knowledge about the technical needs but felt insecure about the social aspects of a renovation.

In order to understand the place that the housing company wants to develop together with all the people acting in the area, and to understand how the people use the area today and might use in the future, a mapping of the area was planned. Important question were: what qualities, values, needs and what potentials are there, and how can they be translated into physical designs? With a starting point in the situation today, the question was: what are the potentials and challenges for the development of Långängen? A dialogue process was proposed to
formulate and visualize a common vision so that all stakeholders feel involved, to identify constructive solutions for challenges that occur besides the actual renovation process, such as increased costs for the housing manager and the residents. Another important aspect was to understand housing qualities of the district and the perception of architectural values.

**Method**

A dialogue process in form of an In-depth dialogue with residents has been carried out in the housing district Långängen. The dialogue process was performed by a transdisciplinary team consisting of representatives from the housing owner and manager, an architect firm with competences in sociology, the tenant organization in Western Sweden, and researchers with a background from architecture and environmental psychology. The process comprised several activities: design of the consultation process and selection of tools, gathering of information, compilation of material, feedback to the residents and housing company, and following-up. In order to gather information about the area today and about current users, we employed a series of different methods: project meetings within the team and the housing company, literature studies, and data collection from the residents by intercept interviews, a questionnaire survey, and a walking tour with different stakeholders, see Table 1. In our study, mainly results from the extensive data collection part will be presented and discussed.

Table 1. Activities of the In-depth dialogue. Note: a) marks the responsible stakeholder

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Aim</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Period</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Design of a consultation process and selection of tools</td>
<td>To identify stakeholders of the project (to be informed/involved)</td>
<td>Stakeholder analysis - Meetings - Visit of district</td>
<td>Housing company - Architect firm a - Tenant organization - Researchers</td>
<td>May – October 2012</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information retrieval</td>
<td>To collect data about the housing district and its users</td>
<td>Intercept interviews - 20 interviews + short questionnaire - at 3 occasions - duration: 3 to 15 min</td>
<td>Researchers</td>
<td>May 2012</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Status quo description - Local statistics - Literature studies</td>
<td>Researchers</td>
<td>September - October 2012</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Questionnaire survey - Total survey - 475 households - Response rate 46,5 %</td>
<td>Housing company - Architect firm - Tenant organization - Researchers a</td>
<td>November 2012</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Walking tour - 1 hour - 7 different places, 4 outdoor/3 indoor</td>
<td>Residents - Housing company - Architect firm - Tenant organization - Researchers a</td>
<td>December 2012</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Focus group interview - 5 persons, age 27 to 31</td>
<td>Residents - Architect firm - Tenant organization - Researchers a</td>
<td>June 2013</td>
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<td>Compilation of material and feedback to stakeholders</td>
<td>Housing company: To give early feedback to residents, include critical issues</td>
<td>- Meetings - Letter to residents - Feedback workshop</td>
<td>Residents - Housing company - Architect firm a - Tenant organization</td>
<td>November 2012 – May 2013</td>
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Residents: To communicate results and adjust content

- Researchers

Following-up To collect feedback from the residents about the process
- Mail to the residents, Questionnaires
- Researchers On-going

The challenges – results from the In-depth dialogue

**Status quo description**

In the status quo description of the district Långängen a variety of local statistical data (age distribution, level of education, average income, unemployment rate, rents, etc.) and results from prior studies conducted in the area with focus on social aspects (safety tours, attitude studies, architectural pre-studies) are presented in order to describe the district and its population today. Results revealed, among other things, that the population of the area was lower than expected, with nearly half of the residents in the 25-44 year age group. In 2012, the level of education, the average income but also the average rent for the flats was below the average of the city of Gothenburg. The unemployment was almost 5 percent units higher than the city’s average, i.e. 11.5 percent. The residents appreciate the closeness to greenery and public transport. At the same, the residents have feels somewhat unsafety despite the crime rate is the same as the Swedish average and the actual crime has decreased during the last years. None of the previous studies has investigated the flats as such. [3]

**Intercept interviews**

The intercept interviews, i.e. short interviews conducted on the streets of the district with respondents selected out of passing-by people, aimed at getting an overall picture about the outer residential qualities. The interviews covered three main questions: 1) what aspects the respondents appreciated in the district Långängen, 2) what they thought of to live in an area with older buildings and 3) aspects they didn’t like or wanted to see changed. On the mini-questionnaire the respondents marked on a 5-grade Likert scale the importance of green spaces, playgrounds, trees, clean and tidy, nice buildings, and meeting places to thrive.

Results indicate that the residents generally have a positive attitude to the housing environment. Two qualities are particularly important from the residents’ perspective: proximity to green areas and the charming character of the older buildings. Also, the proximity to the city centre and the ease to go there (by public transport) is appreciated. The feeling of safety seems to have increased the last years but the respondents had difficulties to point at what has been improved. Possibly it can be related to the neighbouring development area. Two other positive aspects, not directly connected to the outdoor environment, were highlighted by the respondents: cheap rents and qualities in the kitchen. [4]

**Questionnaire survey**

The questionnaire about housing qualities gives an increased knowledge about the todays’ residents regarding their way of life, outdoor qualities of the housing district and indoor qualities of the flats, and their thoughts and attitudes about future renovations. Results show
that the residents are quite satisfied with their living situation. Regarding the district as a whole, the respondents are most satisfied with access to the public transport, squares and open spaces and the possibility to go by bicycle or to walk. Least satisfied are they with the management of the properties in the area, access to different types of meeting places as well as the feeling of safety at evenings and nights. Regarding their own flats the respondents are most satisfied with the natural lighting. Insulation, temperature and ventilation are considered as important aspects to be improved. Both kitchen and bathroom are rooms a majority sees important to invest in. The questionnaire also revealed that the most important factors in determining residents’ overall satisfaction with their flats were how satisfied they were with the kitchen, the quality of daylight, and the sound insulation.

The questionnaire showed that in preparing for renovations, it is important to provide residents with information about and influence over the process, especially the increase in rent, the time schedule and priorities. Choosing the right standard for the renovation was considered important by the respondents, as was giving residents influence over aesthetic aspects (colour, material, quality, appearance). Several respondents wish to conserve the time typical expression of the buildings. [5]

Walking tour with different stakeholders
During the walking tour, a number of affected stakeholders (personnel from the housing company, a local organization of real-estate managers, residents, etc.) together walked through the area and discussed the problems/challenges and the opportunities/positive aspects of seven different places. The places were selected based on results from the questionnaire were respondents marked on a map places they like respectively dislike. Regarding the three outdoor places perceived problems/challenges are un-personal backsides with monotonous and indistinct spaces. They also lack identity for those not living in the area. Cars drive fast and it is difficult to distinguish between public and private spaces. The indicated positive aspects/opportunities of the places are potentials to make the area more welcoming with allotment and meeting places. The places could be more “alive” daytime and should have front sides. Mentioned problems/challenges for the indoor places are the need of alteration and well thought through renovations and the limited accessibility with a certain considerations that this belongs to historical charm. Positive aspects/opportunities described by the participants were the housing qualities with the fine details reminding about the history of the buildings. The flats were perceived as well-planned. [6]

Focus group interview
A focus group interview was conducted in order to get a deeper understanding of the younger residents view about the housing district. The group consisted of residents who had expressed their interest to participate in either the questionnaire or the feedback meeting. Themes touched the outdoor living environment, the architecture and the flats. The participants reasoned in what way they think about these themes, conservation or renewal of the buildings and flats, and aspects that can influence the rent setting. Generally, the individuals have different views and wishes. Some find it very important that the facades are renovated and
freshened up whilst other find it rather charming when it is a little bit worn. However, none of
the interviewees wanted a total renovation that turns the area into a new, modernized version
but they wish to keep it at least in the same style, i.e. they want a renovation that conserves
the look. [7]

*Feedback and follow-up*
Feedback to the housing company was given at project meetings with the purpose to support
the company early in the process to respond to the residents’ critical questions but also to
secure that no important issues were forgotten. Feedback to the residents was given at a
particular follow-up meeting in order to communicate results and to adjust content. All
residents and stakeholders in the housing district were invited. At that meeting results from
the survey and the walking tour were presented which was appreciated by the residents. The
housing company introduced first thoughts for the coming renovation and the main part of the
discussion revolved around the renovation process and the potential economic consequences.
For a future dialogue between the housing company and the residents the form of reference
groups were chosen. The dialogue process goes on and a gradual renovation process has
started. A follow-up of the process will be carried out later. [8]

*Discussion and conclusion*
The dialogue process increased the knowledge about what is perceived as important from
residents’ perspective and what could be experienced as problematic in the coming renovation
process. The intercept interviews indicated for example two qualities which are important
from a resident perspective; the value of and proximity to green areas and the charm of the
older buildings. The questionnaire survey revealed that most influential for how satisfied the
residents are with their flat is the kitchen followed by natural light and sound insulation. The
questionnaire also showed the importance of information about and influence on rent increase
before the renovation starts. It has been seen as important to have different levels for the
renovation as well as to have some influence on aesthetic aspects. The walking tour enhanced
the meeting of different stakeholders and established an integrated view.

For the housing company the dialogue process means that questions are handled in an ethic
way; they can make well-informed decision and integrate necessary technical and indoor
climate renovation measures with knowledge about social, cultural historical and architectural
aspects to arrive at integrated and sustainable long-term decisions. For the residents the dialog
process means improved possibilities to understand the renovation project and its
consequences, at the same time they can influence, participate and follow the process.

The dialogue process had direct impact on the renovation process. For example, the housing
manager provided two alternative solutions for renovation of the kitchen where the residents
can choose between a kitchen in the style of the 1950s, i.e. renovation with care, and a
modern kitchen. Even if many wanted to keep the kitchen in the style of the 50s, there were
not so many residents who actually selected this kitchen when the renovation came closer.
This indicates a gap between what the user states and what he/she actually selects. This also
indicates the importance of keeping the dialogue alive through the whole process and the necessity of trust between the involved stakeholders. First feedback results from the residents’ perspective indicate that the residents are not very happy with the dialogue, they feel “run over” and they consider that there was no dialogue. This doesn’t mean that the dialogue process as such was wrong, but it is difficult for people in general to assimilate information.

The In-depth dialogue with the residents has contributed with knowledge to support decision making in the specific renovation project Långängen and with practical experience how to organize a dialogue process. The dialogue included social questions and integrated more stakeholders than usual to express their opinion and to identify problem areas. In a broader perspective, experiences from the dialogue process can contribute with a methodology and knowledge valuable for larger renovations of rental flat house from this period and contribute to achieve an integrated, sustainable renovation. A conscious work with dialogue processes is means also responsibility. Involving people demands respecting their time, commitment and comments, following-up and feedback are keywords here. Finally, a dialogue process should rather be seen as the backbone of the process - always present and alive - and not only as a part of the renovation process.

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