Planning for Security

It takes a lot to ruffle the average Berliner. The atmosphere in the rumbling commuter train is oddly devoid of emotion. Tired eyes stare listlessly at the end of the working day. Even when an expressionless voice announces over the loudspeakers that the train will terminate in Lichtenberg and passengers must continue by bus, no one complains. In Munich, this would have caused quite a clamor. The journey from the city center to the far north-east takes nearly two hours. The warmth of the late afternoon provides some consolation, the bizarre cloud formations torn between sunshine and storm. In this light, the suburb of Marzahn appears almost idyllic, with swaths of green between the high-rise blocks.

The sheer monotony of the facades, between which springtime clamors for its due attention, is somehow fascinating to anyone who grew up in a small-town terraced house of average age, size and mediocrity. And yet residents, in particular, regard Marzahn as a problem area. Those same people who remain oblivious to the vagaries of the public transport system are apt to lose their cool when it comes to the safety of their local environment. Many feel increasingly under threat – and this despite the slight downward trend in crime statistics. This inconsistency between perception and reality is one of the central findings in a study conducted here and in the suburb of Gropiusstadt by sociologist Tim Lukas, who is working on his doctorate at the Max Planck Institute for Criminal Law.

Wandering through the neighborhood, Lukas doesn’t look much like a scientist. The 31-year-old sociologist knows his way around well enough to serve as a guide on the city tours that have recently begun to make forays into the hinterland of the eastern part of Berlin. Have these pre-fab concrete blocks suddenly acquired cult status? Are the clichéd concepts of high vacancy rates and simmering social unrest mistaken? These are the questions that attract the interest of tourists “on the lookout for locals,” irrespective of whether they were drawn here from Berlin, Saxony or even Russia.

Walking among the high-rise pre-fabs leads past “Kiek,” the local community center. Here, the sun beams down from a billboard that proclaims in Vietnamese and Russian: “Come on in and have some fun, there’s something for everyone here!” – a local situational analysis in a nutshell. For Tim Lukas and his team, this was also the starting point for their research project on crime prevention in sprawling residential developments.

Fighting Crime by Improving Standards

Flashback to fall 2003, and to a small group of people from England, Germany, Hungary and Poland who share a common interest. As part of a special program funded by the European Commission, they aim to empirically assess whether structural and architectural modifications are effective in preventing crime in high-rise developments. Does improving the standard of their constructed environment mean that residents feel less afraid of crime? Does the degree of social control increase, and do they perceive a greater responsibility? Does the residential structure alter in certain areas because people like to live there and because the fluctuation rate is lower?

To substantiate its findings, the project looks to two sources, explains Tim Lukas: “In each of the individual countries, we are circulating questionnaires among residents in selected large housing developments, asking them about their attitudes toward crime and their feelings of insecurity. We are also interviewing experts from the police and organizations that provide the housing. The teams also travel around on a sort of research carousel to visit the areas their partners are studying and compile reports on positive and negative developments.” Given that the research is ongoing, the results are not yet available. But Lukas is confident that the project will provide valuable insights into the ways in which crime prevention can be achieved in high-rise developments.

The view from the 30th floor of one of the apartment blocks in Berlin’s Gropiusstadt is stunning – but as a place to live, it’s not the most popular choice. Yet here, as in the rest of Europe, the image of these high-rise developments has supposedly been rehabilitated both socially and structurally. Tim Lukas, a doctoral student at the Max Planck Institute for Foreign and International Criminal Law, has been investigating whether crime levels have fallen and whether tenants now feel safer.
From the mid-1980s, large housing developments in the 1990s have borne out this view. There has been a general recognition that young people, migrants and unemployed persons engendered high fluctuation rates. This, in turn, contributed to anonymity and a breakdown in communication. The inhabitants identified less and less with the environment in which they lived. Disorder and squall neglect became widespread, due to no small part to a lack of social control.

Before: A light show gives a taste of things to come ...

After: Lopped-off tower blocks break up the building contours.

Marzahn: Downsize High-Rises

The tower blocks in Marzahn North are part of the wider Marzahn-Hellersdorf district in the east of Berlin. Of the 250,400 or so Berliners who call the suburb home, 70 percent live in pre-fabricated concrete apartment blocks erected between 1977 and 1989. “Uninspired and monotonous” is how Tim Lukas describes Marzahn, despite it having been secretly modeled on the vertical garden cities proposed by Le Corbusier.

Marzahn North, with its predominantly 6- to 11-story pre-fab blocks, was built between 1984 and 1989. The current population of the area studied (roughly 17,500) includes a surprisingly large number of young people. Only 30 percent of residents are over 55. The most numerous age group, accounting for 32.2 percent, is made up of 27- to 45-year-olds. Here, 5.5 percent of the people are immigrants, mostly from Poland, Russia and Vietnam. The reason why this proportion is low compared with the average of 13.2 percent for Berlin as a whole is that the ethnic German migrants from Russia often hold German citizenship. The 15.2 percent of Marzahn North residents who receive welfare benefits, on the other hand, is substantially higher than the Berlin average of 8 percent.

As one of the first Berlin suburbs to benefit from the renovation programs set up for East Germany’s housing developments, Marzahn North is now almost completely refurbished. The technical infrastructure of the buildings has improved markedly. Balconies and elevators are now standard. The pilot project “Ahrensfelder Terrassen” is a source of inspiration, one cannot help but chime in. This resulted in some attractive redesigns in the Marzahn North and Gropiustadt, Lukas defined two areas of study, each of which had around 17,000 inhabitants in 2005.

In the larger developments, it was no longer enough just to fix a few defective heating systems. In Germany, not only the housing associations, but also the federal and state governments stepped in: a federal government report presented in 1995 struck a nerve as it laid bare the country’s 240 or so large-scale developments with around 1.6 million housing units – roughly 5 percent of Germany’s entire housing supply. Since 1999, urban renewal programs such as the “Socially Integrative City” have targeted areas with “special development needs.” These programs take an integrated approach: they aim to improve both housing and living conditions and the economic basis in a given area, as well as to raise its image in the hopes that residents will identify more strongly with where they live. At the same time, efforts are made to broaden the life choices open to residents through education and training.

Tim Lukas has been studying whether these programs give residents a greater sense of safety and has drawn comparisons between a high-rise development built in East Berlin before the Wall came down and one in the West. One difference between housing developments under the two systems is obvious: whereas, in what used to be West Germany, they are home to only 1.7 percent of the population, in the former East Germany and East Berlin, they house almost one in four.

Berlin was an obvious choice for further research: in Marzahn North and Gropiustadt, Lukas defined two areas of study, each of which had around 17,000 inhabitants in 2000 and 2005. Now it is slowly rising again, not least because the numerous improvements are taking effect. Of course it makes sense to tailor these to individual cases, explains Lukas, “But in principle, the guidelines laid down by the Interior Ministry in Lower Saxony are worth following.” These define changes in urban planning and in design and structure to be made in critical aspects of individual housing units, buildings and residential districts. Social management of the organizations tasked with providing housing are aimed at contributing to citizens’ responsibility and good neighborliness. It is also helpful for housing providers to cooperate with the local police, community administration agencies and institutions, local social and youth workers, and the crime prevention council. And lastly, targeted leisure activities are expected to integrate those groups of residents that cause problems.

Urban Planners Playing with Lego

A little bit of everything has gone into Marzahn North, with the result that the trepidation experienced by visitors unfamiliar with Berlin’s high-rise developments quickly gives way to a memorable lesson in urban development. As the rows of brightly-painted apartment blocks bask in the sunlight and the Ahrensfelder Terrassen project comes into view, one cannot help but chime in with the research teams from abroad: all of them have praised the down sizing of East Berlin’s pre-fab blocks. Following a pattern set in Britain, a few floors were simply lopped off the 11-story blocks. “A bit like Lego,” as one team described it. This resulted in some attractive new building designs – a metamorphosis in Marzahn.

But that’s not all: the dismantled components were sold and reused by grateful purchasers in St. Petersburg. A relatively small-scale structure rising above a row of shops, entrances featuring better security, flowerbeds lovingly planted by local residents, and several attractive playgrounds give the impression of a well-consid-
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Room for expression: Youngsters in Marzahn practice tricks on their skateboards. Room to let off steam: The playground in Gropiusstadt in the calm before the afternoon storm.

and is actually generating pride on the area. The fact that the plan works employment also help strengthen Mar- zhans. Anti-aggression training for in a unit in the local shopping cen- ter. The teams of researchers from partner countries have been particularly im- pressed by the concierges that have been established in individual blocks. As a kind of multifunctional caretaker, they serve as a point of contact and a focus of social inter- action in an otherwise anonymous environment, and help prevent pos- sible acts of damage.

Contact is also encouraged with the employees of the neighborhood management body, who are based in a unit in the local shopping cen- ter. Anti-aggression training for children and young people, as well as assistance for those seeking em- ployment also help strengthen Mar- zhans' ties with their local area. The fact that the plan works and is actually generating pride on the part of residents is evidenced by an electric power distributor box: a small sticker on it advertises "The Shirt for the 'Hood", encour- aging locals to wear Marzahn next to their hearts.

The scene changes to Gropiusstadt in the morning. Anyone expecting a faceless concrete jungle is likely to be astonished at how much greenery can be found between the widely spaced tower blocks. The gaps are filled by large, fenced-off adventure playgrounds. They are still deserted at this hour, but it is not hard to imagine how they will be later on, as life's little dramas are played out in the sandpit while parents share the latest gossip.

Barricades Are not the Answer

Who would have expected to find small, detached houses scattered among the massive tower blocks? But the architect Walter Gropius wanted to create a varied residential landscape with leisure facilities. Yet there is a lack of illumination, ram- pant vegetation blocks the line of sight, and youths hang around the subway stations – which are some of the reasons for the security prob- lems in Gropiusstadt. The Walter Gropius school saw no alternative but to erect a tall barbed-wire fence around their plot – a fatal idea, since the fence creates a prison-like atmosphere that contrasts with the modern architecture, which is genu- inely worth seeing.

In reality, Berlin's tallest residen- tial building sets an example of how easy it is to get inside: as the buzzer sounds to admit an ambulance crew, Tim Lukas slips in after them. The elevator takes us to the 30th floor, where the view from the – unglazed – hallway takes in half Berlin. Do the people who live here still admire this amazing vista? The Polish re- search team in particular was torn between the pros and cons of Gro- piusstadt: "Impressive, somehow even fascinating," was their assessment. "But fundamentally, a real monstrosity."

A harsh judgment with which one need not agree. However, Lukas' survey of the residents also reveals a conflicting, and sometimes unfat- tering, picture. They were asked whether they found their residential environment pleasant, safe, quiet, attractive and clean, and how they would have rated these same aspects five years ago. Clearly, the residents of Gropiusstadt believed themselves to have been more satisfied five years ago, in every respect. The greatest decrease was in a feeling of security – only 24 percent of the 500 people polled feel safer now. Around 60 percent think they felt safer in 2000. Half of them would leave Gro- piusstadt today if they could.

In Marzahn North, the situation is entirely different: there are quite a few who perceive their environment today as being less safe and less quiet, but 65 percent of men and women still find their neighborhood pleasant and around 7 percent even find it attractive. The majority of Marzahn residents obviously consider the improvements to be a success. Looking back five years, only 41 percent of tenants then re- garded the area as attractive. Never- theless, 38 percent of those surveyed in Marzahn North would move away if they could.

A Growing Feeling of Incertainty

The questions on perceptions of se- curity yielded similar results. Wheth- er at home or in the public open spaces around the housing blocks, on the adjacent streets or in public transportation, whether by day or by night, the residents of both areas felt less safe in 2005 than they had in 2000. Especially in Gropiusstadt, where 85.7 percent of those sur- veied are unwilling to travel by public transportation after dark. The residents of Marzahn North are gen- erally less timid. To Tim Lukas, how- ever, this doesn't necessarily mean that East Germans are braver. He be- lieves the reason lies in the high proportion of older people who live in Gropiusstadt, and who are funda- mentally more prone to fear than younger people.

However, there is little difference between people's perceptions of problems in the two developments: 21 and 16.4 percent, respectively, think there are a lot of problems in...
their district, while 65 and 61.9 percent think there are a fair number. The main concerns are groups of youths hanging around, drunkenness, garbage and dirt in streets and parks, and too much noise.

**Crime Is Decreasing**

The increasing feelings of insecurity are, at least to some extent, inconsistent with crime rates in the two areas under investigation. In 2000, for example, there were 132 crimes per 1,000 residents in Marzahn North, and 125 per 1,000 in Gropiusstadt. In the following two years, the figures rose to 182.5 in the western area and 173.4 in the east. In Gropiusstadt, where residents feel significantly less safe, the number of crimes per 1,000 residents dropped to 116.3 in 2004 – in other words, below the initial figure for 2000. In Marzahn North, the number of crimes had fallen no further than 164 by 2004. Despite this, Marzahn residents feel more comfortable in their environment, the more they are likely to be afraid.

A clear East-West division is discernible in the fear of crime: on a similar scale of 1 to 4, it was highest in Gropiusstadt, at 2.33, and in Marzahn North it stood at 2.18, whereas in Krakow it was just 1.67, and in Budapest 1.66. On the other hand, contact with the neighborhood is rougher in Marzahn already hinted at: in both Eastern European countries, residents of the high-rise developments included in the study feel far greater ties to the environment in which they live. On a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 indicates the strongest tie, the loyalty score in Gropiusstadt was 2.7, in Marzahn it was 2.46, in Budapest 2.33 and in Krakow 1.99.

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