Workshop 18 - Residential Environments and People

Liveability in social housing: Three case-studies in Flanders

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Abstract

In Flanders, currently new social housing legislation is being prepared. As the law now stands, social rented houses are allocated to Flemish rules not allowing housing associations to deal with local circumstances. The Flemish government is considering authorizing more local autonomy in housing allocation in order to allow housing associations to respond to liveability problems.

Within this context, the Flemish government ordered a research with the aim to identify parameters that can be used to objectify problematic social housing districts in terms of liveability and to get a better understanding of the nature and causes of liveability problems in social housing areas. In addition, we will investigate which measures are suited for countering or preventing liveability problems.

In a first part of the paper, the concepts of liveability and social mix will be clarified and the appropriateness of common strategies to overcome liveability problems in social housing will be discussed, based on a literature overview. In a second part, the results of three case-studies in social housing areas are described. For these areas, information on liveability issues was gathered by interviewing key informants and searching all relevant documents, in order to get a better understanding of the nature and causes of liveability problems.

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1 Sien Winters (Hoger Instituut voor de Arbeid) contributed to the design of the research and performed a critical reading of the conference paper.

With regard to the theoretical concepts at stake we relied upon a literature review by Katrien Tratsaert (Hoger Instituut voor de Arbeid).
Introduction

At present, in Flanders, there is a growing concern about liveability of social housing areas. In this respect, the concept of liveability is frequently mentioned along with the concept of ‘social mix’ (Flemish Parliament, 2002). Both concepts regularly appear in Flemish policy texts, in which the concepts are never clearly defined and in which implicitly is assumed that there is a causal link between them.

In the first part of the paper an attempt is made to clarify the meaning of the two concepts at stake and to scrutinize their presumed interdependence. These clarifications form the conceptual framework of our research concerning liveability is social housing.

The Flemish social rental patrimony consists of 130,000 living units, representing 6% of the total housing stock. Compared to other countries, the share of high rise within social housing is relatively small. Liveability problems are no widespread phenomena within Flemish social housing, as results of a study concerning the profile of the social tenant indicate (Pannecoucke e.a., 2001). To get a broader picture of Flemish social housing we refer to the conference paper by Winters and Elsinga about the future of Flemish social housing.

In Flemish social housing, the allocation system for social rental dwellings is strictly regulated at Flemish level. The social housing associations are offered few possibilities to put local accents in the allocation procedure. The main allocation rule is the order of registration, whereas priority rules exist for some well-defined categories (e.g. camping residents, households living in uninhabitable dwellings, handicapped if the dwelling is fit for the handicap).

At present, several policy proposals circulate to respond to liveability problems in Flemish social housing. One option is to adjust (raise) the income boundaries for admission to social housing, at a Flemish level. Another option is to give more autonomy to social housing associations or municipalities with regard to the allocation procedure. A more flexible allocation system would become possible for social housing areas that can be categorized as ‘problematic in terms of liveability’. The problem-analysis to identify these areas should include an analysis of the problems and causes, but should also include figures to objectify the stated problems (Ministry of the Flemish Community, Department Housing Policy, 2005).

Our study fits within the discussed Flemish policy option that wants to give more local autonomy with respect to allocation, in order to respond to liveability problems. Within this context, we set up a research design that allowed us to get a better understanding of the nature and causes of liveability problems in social housing areas and allowed us to identify parameters for objectifying problematic social housing districts in terms of liveability. In addition, we wanted to explore what measures are suited for countering or preventing liveability problems. Although we are aware of the fact that a variety of measures exists to deal with liveability, we primarily are focused – given the aim of the research - on the possible role of a more flexible allocation procedure.
We opted for a multiple cases-study design, selecting three social housing areas for in-depth research. The three cases were selected, taking several possible determinants of liveability into account. The main data-sources are the half-structured interviews with key informants and residents. Furthermore, all relevant sources concerning liveability issues - including statistical figures - were scrutinized.

1. Conceptual framework

Liveability

Liveability always refers to the environment from the perspective of the individual. People attach meaning to the environment, which is referred to as ‘liveability’ (Leidelmeijer en van Kamp, 2003). In our view, liveability always refers to the perception of the environment; to the subjective evaluation of the quality of the housing conditions.

In the literature concerning ‘liveability’ there are different views about the dimensions that should be included to capture the concept. To a large extent, these different views stem from a different background discipline. In recent liveability studies in Flanders and the Netherlands, liveability usually is made operational by means of the perception of four dimensions (Dewilde & Winters, 2000; Meire & Bracke, 2005; Raymaekers e.a., 2002; Stoop & Albertijn, 2003). The four dimensions are:

- Quality of the dwelling/building
- Quality of the physical environment, including the level of services and facilities
- Quality of the social environment
- Safety of the neighbourhood

The dimension ‘safety’ actually ranges over the other three dimensions since the level of safety is related to behavioural as well as environmental features. A liveability problem we can define as ‘dissatisfaction with regard to one of the aspects of the different liveability dimensions’.

The complexity of the ‘liveability’ concept contributed to the fact that only few attempts are made to develop theory. In this part, we discuss a conceptual model based on the ‘model concerning the perception of residential environment’ of Marsman and Leidelmeijer (2001).
The model clarifies that features of the physical environment (lack of isolation, no play area ...) as well as characteristics of the residents (e.g. percentage elderly, children, personal opinion ...) both determine residential satisfaction or liveability.

Further, it is important to comprehend that the different components of liveability are interrelated. For instance, a filthy neighbourhood, a lack of lighting or a high crime rate will not invite people to meet outside and make contacts. Also, a lack of neighbourhood involvement may contribute to higher feelings of insecurity or to less respect for neighbours. Liveability dimensions are not isolated from one and another.

The model also points out that characteristics of the physical environment may influence the residents’ characteristics. It is for instance not likely that high income households will move to a filthy, neglected neighbourhood. Also, elderly will not be eager to move to a distant residential area, far from all services and facilities.

In our research, it is important to understand the difference between ‘indicators’ and ‘determinants’ of liveability. Determinants of liveability are features of the physical environment or residents that have an influence on the liveability of a residential area, whereas indicators are used to measure the abstract concept liveability itself. These indicators might as well be subjective (survey among residents) or objective (data that are related to the quality of the residential environment). If the determinant itself is an abstract concept, one or more indicators will be needed to measure it (Leidelmeijer & Van Kamp, 2003).

Measures to deal with liveability problems

Liveability problems in residential areas are a complex phenomenon. The problems are locally different, which makes that no cut-and-dried solutions are available. Furthermore, the recovery of a neighbourhood dealing with liveability issues exceeds the competence and the means of social housing associations. Conquering the problems, demands the effort of all actors involved: residents, communal authorities,
police, welfare work, social housing associations, community workers …. The application of a range of measures - an integral approach - is necessary to overcome or prevent liveability problems.

Solutions for liveability problems can be divided in two categories, which may complement each other.

On the one hand, there are authors who believe in measures that focus on the ‘manipulation of the residents’. These measures are directed at changing the behavior, the attitude, perception or well-being of the residents in the desired way. They want to improve liveability, by directly (housing support, administrative sanctions, introducing a social supervisor) or indirectly (creating more meeting places, organizing a neighborhood party, organizing residents’ participation) shaping people’s behaviour, perceptions and attitudes.

On the other hand, there are measures that try to change the composition of the residents’ group in order to improve liveability. This is possible via the resident (e.g. assigning rules), via the physical environment (e.g. embellishment to attract higher incomes) or via the dwellings (e.g. by building a mix of owner-occupied and tenant’s dwellings). In this logic, one starts from the idea that something as an ‘ideal social mix’ with regard to resident features exists. In this vision, liveability problems can be prevented or overcome by adjusting the composition of the residents’ group in the desired direction.

**Social mix**

The concept of ‘social mix’ refers to the mingling of residents within a well defined geographical area. This can be a country, region, city, quarter or apartment block. Creating a ‘social mix’ refers to the mixing of people, with regard to (Johnston, 2002):

- social class or socio-economic status
- social categories, e.g. based on ethnic origin
- stage of life
- household or family-type

In most cases, social mix refers to the mingling of persons or households from a different social background or various socio-economic statuses.

The motives for creating a social mix in neighbourhoods are diverse. Uitermark and Duyvendak (2004) and also Bolt (2004) emphasize that social mingling can be applied for two purposes. On the one hand, for promoting social mobility and social integration of socio-economic weaker groups. In this view, one believes implicitly in the positive influence of middle class households as a role model (Loopmans, 2000; Simon, 2003). On the other hand, a social mix can be used in order to spread the inconveniences some societal groups bring along and to render the neighbourhood ‘controllable’. In this view, problems are dealt with by thinning them, by making them less visible.

Our literature review pointed out that the effect of ‘social mix’ to combat liveability problems in (social) residential areas is unclear. Atkinson (2005), who analyzed existing research concerning ‘social mix’ on the neighbourhood level, concluded that
up to now no empirical evidence is found for the presumed positive effect of a ‘social mix’ on the level of liveability.

Furthermore, several researchers question the noble intentions of this policy option. For in problematic neighbourhoods the failure of (integration, poverty) policy is most visible. Spreading the so-called problematic social tenants makes them less visible and makes it easier to neglect the problems (at national level) or control the problems (at local level) (Uitermark, 2003; Arthurson, 2002).

According to Kesteloot (1998) the promoting of ‘social mix’ in Flemish social housing is in the first place meant to attract higher income households (that pay more rent) in order to overcome the financial problems several social housing associations are dealing with. As Kesteloot argues, this happens under the veil of offering possibilities for integration to deprived people.

On the contrary, the belief exists that homogeneous neighbourhoods with regard to residents’ characteristics will yield less liveability problems and more social cohesion than heterogeneous areas. In this view, liveability conflicts are partly caused by the clash of different lifestyles. Therefore, for instance in the Netherlands, certain social housing associations allocate social dwellings according to the ‘lifestyle’ of the candidate households. People sharing the same ‘lifestyle’ will be housed together (Hagens, 2003). Also in Flanders, this option with regard to the allocation procedure is defended (Cools, 2004).

2. Research design

The aim of our research is to get a better understanding of liveability problems in social housing areas in Flanders on the one hand, and to get a better insight in the nature of the measures that are needed to overcome/ prevent these problems on the other hand. Possibly some contextual features may be identified that can be used at a local level to objectify ‘problematic residential areas’. As mentioned, the current Flemish policy option would allow a more flexible allocation system in these areas.

1. The first goal – getting insight in liveability problems - can be further specified as follows:
   − What liveability problems exist in social housing in Flanders?
   − How do these problems arise?
   − What contextual features (determinants) contribute to these problems?

2. Further, our study aims at getting a better understanding of the measures that are needed to combat liveability problems. More specific, our questions are:
   − What measures exist for dealing with liveability in a social residential area? Which are suitable?
   − What are the possibilities of a more flexible system of allocation in this regard?

3. Finally, we will try to gather information concerning possible indicators of liveability. For this matter, we do not only rely on the results of our case analyses. We bring in the results of a screening of all possible data sources concerning
indicators of liveability, involving all relevant Flemish/federal surveys, administrative databases, meta-databases and policy documents.

**Research method: three case-studies**

Liveability is a complex social phenomenon that is not easily quantified and that is perceived differently by different groups (e.g. tenants – housing associations). This is one of the reasons why we opted for a case study design. A case study is a suitable method if one wants to provide insights in the ‘complexity’ of a certain phenomenon and its background in a certain context (Hutjes & Van Buuren, 1992).

Further, a case study is also an attractive method regarding practice-oriented research, with the aim to generate policy advice. The approach enables us to get an understanding of the different points-of-view concerning certain problems and their solutions (Swanborn, 1996). As mentioned before, one of the goals of the research is to generate insight in the possible solutions for liveability problems in social housing.

We opted for what is called a ‘multiple case study design’ (Yin, 2003). In order to explain certain liveability issues – one of our research objectives - it is useful to build in some variation in the units that are analyzed. When we limit ourselves to scrutinizing one case, it is impossible to assess whether we are dealing with a specific or a more general situation.

Regarding the choice of cases, there is no agreement in literature which criteria one should use. We opted for a combination of cases that are ‘information rich’ and that contrast with each other on some variables (environment – residents) that are expected to influence liveability. Cases that are ‘information rich’ are cases in which the studied phenomenon is clearly present. In our study such cases are social housing areas that are known to deal with liveability problems.

By means of a Two-step cluster analyses, all statistical sectors in Flanders that include social housing areas with more than 75 living units, were divided in four clusters with regard to some environmental features, namely ‘number of social dwellings within the statistical sector’ and ‘percentage social apartments for that statistical sector’.

In a next step, three statistical sectors were selected from each cluster taking two criteria into account: they should be ‘informative’ (with liveability problems present) and represent all Flemish regions. Using information from a survey held by the Flemish Housing Corporation (Vlaamse Huisvestingsmaatschappij, VHM) in 2005 we could select social housing areas (within the statistical sectors) that are classified as ‘problematic in terms of liveability’ by their own social housing associations.

In a following step, these twelve statistical sectors were documented for a range of characteristics of the population (e.g. age composition, unemployment rate) and physical environment (type of housing and number of social living units). In a final

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2 Statistical sector: in 1970 all Belgian communities were divided in statistical units (sectors), based on constructional, social and economic characteristics.
step, we selected three cases from three different clusters that contrast with each other on several characteristics. Our selected statistical sectors – comprising the social housing areas - are called ‘Rabot station’ (Ghent), ‘Slachthuiswijk’ (Antwerp) and ‘Haneberg’ (Beringen). In popular speech, these areas are respectively called Rabot, Den Dam and Klaverweide. Social housing in Rabot, Den Dam and Klaverweide consists respectively of three high-rise apartment blocks (the ‘Rabot towers’), two middle high-rise buildings and a low-rise residential area.

Table 1: Characteristics of the three selected social housing areas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social housing area</th>
<th>N of social living units</th>
<th>Housing type</th>
<th>Age composition</th>
<th>Unemployment Rate</th>
<th>Family type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rabot station</td>
<td>569</td>
<td>High-rise</td>
<td>Many elderly</td>
<td>32% in neighbourhood</td>
<td>Many singles</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Rabot”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clusters</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cluster 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Slachthuiswijk</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>Middle High-rise</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>20% in neighbourhood</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Den Dam”</td>
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<td>Clusters</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cluster 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Haneberg</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>Low-rise</td>
<td>Many children</td>
<td>12% in neighbourhood</td>
<td>Many families with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Klaverweide”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clusters</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cluster 4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Flemish Housing Company (VHM), Socio-economic survey 2001.

Data collection

In the first instance, all available relevant data-sources were gathered concerning the three selected residential areas. We relied upon figures from the Socio-economic survey 2001, data from the Flemish Housing Corporation (VHM) and the three social housing associations themselves. Further, we scrutinized local action plans, reports of residents’ meetings, liveability studies from community workers, etc.

The most important data-sources are the semi-structured interviews of a selection of key informants and residents. In total, about thirty interviews (ten per case) took place. The following persons/ organizations/ services were interviewed: social department of the social housing associations (SHC’s), director SHC’s, community workers, public centre for social welfare (OCMW), general welfare work (CAW), local police, residents, local priest. Interviewing a variety of organizations/ actors, allowed us to draw a more complete image of the problems concerning liveability. Also with regard to the suggested solutions for the problems it is important to take into account different points-of-view.

The topic-list we used to interview our respondents was based on our research questions and included all relevant themes to get a better insight into problems of liveability and the preferred solutions. The key informants’ interviews can be called informant-interviews since we tried to gather information about the problems that are perceived by the residents, through our key informants. With respect to the perceived causes of the problems and the preferred solutions, we asked the opinion of the key informants themselves.
In addition to the key informants’ interviews, we organized a residents’ interview for each social housing area. Each time, about 5 residents were present. Finally, the researcher got a guided tour in each of the three social housing areas.

After phrasing the first conclusions, a feedback round was organized with a selection of key informants and delegates of the Flemish administration, the Flemish Housing Corporation and the Cabinet of the Minister of Housing. The group discussion led to some new insights, which were added to the report.

3. Findings from our three case-studies

3.1 Nature and determinants of liveability problems

In our three cases, the key informants argued that not only a variety of liveability problems exists, but also that the problems are frequently interrelated and that often one problem can be linked to several causes at the same time. In order to provide insight in this complex matter we decided to construct a conceptual model, based on the results of the cases (see p.11).

The model tries to capture in what way the different liveability dimensions are interrelated, how liveability problems arise and what role certain residential and population characteristics play.

Nature of liveability problems

In this part we will discuss all liveability problems – per dimension- that were present in our three case-studies, according to our respondents. Some problems occurred in all three cases, whereas other issues were only found in one or two.

Quality of the social environment

In all three areas there appeared to be a lack of ‘social cohesion’. This problem is, according to our respondents, not explicitly linked to social housing but is regarded as a general sign of the times. Logically, ‘social isolation’ is related to a lack of social cohesion. Especially in the Rabot case social isolation proved to be a severe problem.

Further, various kinds of conflicts among social tenants were present in our social housing areas. Conflicts that were frequently mentioned are: neighbours’ quarrels about maintenance duties, conflicts about noise nuisance (neighbours, dogs, cultural differences), conflicts between elderly and youngsters about use of space or noise. The nature of these conflicts was shown to be strongly related to the setting (high – low rise) and the composition of the tenants’ population.
Figure: conceptual model concerning liveability

- Quality social environment
  - Social cohesion
  - Communal problems
  - Social isolation

- Quality of physical environment
  - Filthiness
  - Traffic Safety
  - Maintenance
  - Services/facilities

- Resident characteristics
  - Social capacity/
  - Neighbourhood Engagement
  - Ratio young/old
  - Indigenes/immigrants

- Safety

- External factors
  - SHC, police, justice of peace,
  community work, welfare
Particular kinds of conflicts are those that stem from the behaviour of ‘problem tenants’. These are tenants that cause trouble on regular time, whose behaviour is so extreme that an external cause is often referred to. Many key informants made a link between the ‘problem tenants’ and a certain form of addiction or psychic disorder. In each of our three cases people had to deal with some ‘problem tenants’, whose presence was considered as one of the main disturbers of liveability.

**Quality of the physical environment**

Our research pointed out that certain aspects of the physical environment are experienced as problematic by the tenants. First of all, pollution of the environment can evoke severe irritations among residents. An extreme case of environmental degeneration was found in the Rabot case, but also in the other two selected areas people were dissatisfied about pollution by litter, illegal dumping or lack of maintenance. In addition, resentment can be caused by an unsafe traffic situation, as we observed in two of our three cases.

Under the flag of ‘quality of physical environment’ we also place the level of services and facilities in the neighbourhood. Our case-studies show that especially the proximity of food shops is considered to be important. Nevertheless, the general idea was that problems related to the level of services were not essential, compared to problems concerning the social or residential environment.

**Quality of the dwelling/building**

In our cases the residents generally were satisfied with the quality of their dwellings. The most significant problem with regard to the dwelling/building in the three cases was the level of the acoustic isolation. Inadequate isolation appeared to have far-reaching consequences for the liveability in (middle) high-rise. Furthermore, dissatisfaction concerning the quality of the building was shown to arise from the (lack of) maintenance of the common parts, a lack of meeting places or an ill-considered structure of the building.

**Safety of the environment**

In all three cases groups of residents – mainly women and elderly – do not dare to go outside once it’s getting dark. This is in the first place a subjective feeling, since our key informants argue that ‘Den Dam’ in Antwerp, ‘Rabot’ in Gent and ‘Klaverweide’ in Beringen are not known as problem areas concerning crime and delinquency. Also, it is argued that feelings of insecurity are not exclusively found in social housing areas, but are a typical phenomenon in cities like Ghent and Antwerp.

**Determinants of liveability problems (conceptual model)**

In this section we will describe what our key informants perceived as determinants of liveability problems. As argued before, we tried to capture all possible connections in a conceptual model. The model as it is schematically presented, gives an ‘idea’ of the connections that may exist between the residents’ characteristics and the different
liveability dimensions. It is a theoretical framework that gets a different ‘filling-in’ for
different social housing areas. Certain connections are stronger in one residential area
than the other; certain problems arise in one area but not the other, etc.

\[ \text{a. Quality of the social environment} \]

Determinants of the perceived social quality: resident characteristics

As our key informants argue, each residents group has a certain social capacity. Social capacity we define – according to our informants’ insights - as the ‘strength’ and the ‘will’ of the residents to add a positive contribution to the residential area they live in, by taking on several commitments or by respecting their neighbours (no inconvenience) and physical environment (e.g. no pollution).

The concept of social capacity is strongly related to the concept ‘neighbourhood engagement’. Our respondents argue that people with more social capacity are more involved with their neighbourhood. This will also have an effect on the social cohesion of a residential area. In this view, social cohesion will be stronger in residential areas with more ‘social capacity’. Also, social isolation will be less of a problem in neighbourhoods with more ‘social capacity’, since more initiatives will be taken to bring people together. Finally, a higher involvement with the neighbourhood will also lead to fewer conflicts among residents, according to our respondents.

Also the composition regarding age groups can lead to irritations among residents, our study point out. Especially in (middle) high rise a concentration of children may result in communal problems, certainly when a high percentage of elderly is living in the same area/ building. This phenomenon we observed in two of our cases – the ‘Rabottowers’ and the apartment blocks on ‘Den Dam’. It was argued that older residents attach greater importance to a quiet environment and get more easily irritated by children playing and youngster hanging out. This can go along with conflicts about the use of space in the neighbourhood. In the Rabotcase for instance, a conflict exists about the destination of a grass-patch in front of the second building. The youngsters like to play football on this field, whereas the elderly perceive the grass area as a zone to relax.

In the Rabotcase, the first and third apartment block accommodates many residents with the same profile concerning age and family type, namely single elderly or elderly couples. Because they share the same lifestyle and interests, conflicts are few and certain social networks are formed. The second ‘Rabot tower’ on the other hand accommodates households with a strongly contrasting profile: young – often migrant–households on the hand and elderly – often single – on the other hand. According to our informants, this combination yields many ‘living together’ problems and less social cohesion than the tenants’ composition of the other apartment blocks. Thus, the Rabot tower with the greatest mix concerning age and family-type turns out to be the most problematic one in terms of liveability. These results stress that one cannot blindly trust in creating a ‘social mix’ in order to prevent or conquer liveability problems and illustrate that in certain circumstances homogeneous tenants’ profiles yield less liveability conflicts. As already discussed in our theoretical part, the practice of allocating households according to ‘life-style’ already exists in certain countries.
Finally, our cases indicate that people are likely to seek their social contacts within their own community (by **origin**), without this being a sign of prejudice towards the other groups. Language barriers and cultural differences are said to play an important role in this matter. This observed pattern is not harmful for liveability since people choose their situation and do not wish to interact on regular basis with the other groups. Only if the cultural differences lead to explicit conflicts or if people find themselves surrounded by a community one feels not attracted to, liveability is threatened. The latter situation was not present in our three social housing areas. In the Rabotcase and Den Dam-case some key informants argued that differences in living cultures between migrants and Belgians caused annoyance.

In our research none of the selected areas is characterized by a concentration (> 60%) of foreigners. However, KBM Beringen and De Goede Woning both declared to have neighbourhoods with a foreign concentration in their patrimony. In neighbourhoods where the foreign populations are homogeneous (one Moroccan or Turk community) ‘living-together’ problems are said to be few, partly because of the strong social control that would characterize these neighbourhoods. In case of a mix of nationalities, frictions would more easily occur, according to the selected social housing associations.

Finally, in each of our cases, it is argued that the **presence of dogs** influences liveability by causing noise nuisance and polluting the environment. In Flanders, there are no legal grounds on which can be relied to prohibit excesses in this sense. Our case-studies point out that especially in (middle) high-rise the presence of dogs easily causes noise nuisance.

**Determinants of the perceived social quality: features of dwelling/building/physical environment**

Our case-studies show that the **level of acoustic isolation** has a big influence on the liveability dimension ‘social quality’. Sounds from outside that are not deadened or conversations from neighbours that can be clearly understood will yield irritations and conflicts among residents. Also, the fact that many social tenants are not active during daytime (retired, jobless), is said to enhance the problems of noise nuisance.

The respondents also put forward that the **density of the population** plays a role in creating liveability problems. “The more people live close to each other, the higher chances are that ‘living-together’ problems arise”, is a logical reasoning made by many key informants and illustrated by our cases. In the Rabotcase, the ‘tower’ with the highest population density is known to be the most problematic one. In our low-rise case Klaverweide, with lower density, less ‘living-together’ problems were noted.

Further, the **presence of meeting places** in the building or neighbourhood has an influence on the social cohesion between the tenants, according to certain key informants. In our research, the blocks on Den Dam and the Rabottowers did not have any ‘formal’ meeting places. People could only meet each other at the entry hall, the inner court or in the corridors.

Finally, the level of **activities and facilities** in the neighbourhood **directed at children and youngsters** is said to have an influence on the social quality. If there are no
activities organized for youngsters, chances are higher that they will hang out in the 
neighbourhood of the dwellings and evoke annoyance among other residents. The 
Rabot and Klaverweide cases indicate that once a bunch of young people found a 
place to meet and hang out, their spot is not easily given up.

b. Quality of the building/ physical environment

Determinants of the perceived quality of the building and the physical environment

A resident’s population that is involved with their neighbourhood – with social 
capacity – will bring along more easily respect for the environment, according to our 
respondents. The case-studies put forward that pollution of the environment and the 
common parts was one of the main liveability issues in each of the selected areas.

Further, satisfaction with the level of services and facilities depends upon the age 
profile of the resident group. In case of an old population, like the one of the 
‘Rabottowers’ proximity of certain services (food stores, bakery) and good 
opportunities concerning public transport are more important.

c. Safety

Effect of residents’ characteristics, the social quality and the quality of the physical 
environment on feelings of insecurity

Various key informants argue that ‘knowing one’s neighbours’ is essential with regard 
to feelings of insecurity. Neighbours one doesn’t know, remain ‘foreign’ and 
potentially dangerous. The level of social cohesion and – related to this- social 
isoation also play a role in this sense.

In addition, it is mentioned that the state and the level of pollution of the environment 
contributes to feelings of insecurity. A badly lighted, degenerated environment with 
masses of litter will more easily evoke feelings of insecurity than a bright, green 
residential environment, it is argued. The importance of the environment for feelings 
of insecurity is strikingly illustrated in our Rabotcase, where many older tenants do no 
dare to go outside in the evening. This behaviour is partly due to the grey looking, bad 
lighted and filthy environment of the ‘towers’.

As our study indicates, the feelings of insecurity are also stimulated by groups of 
youngsters hanging out in the neighbourhood. Certain places in the ‘Klaverweide’, 
near the ‘Rabottowers’ as well as near the apartment blocks on Den Dam were 
favorite hanging out spots of young people, leading to irritation among certain 
residents.

Further, the composition of the population itself has an influence on the perceived 
level of security. The interviewed residents but also the key informants mention that – 
not surprisingly - especially older and female tenants feel insecure. In the 
Rabottowers, where 34% of the tenants is older than 64, many residents do not dare to 
leave their apartments once it is getting dark.
Effect of level of (perceived) safety on social quality

The feelings of insecurity can – the other way around – also possibly influence the quality of the social environment. For people who feel insecure will not be eager to leave their dwellings and participate in social life. Especially in Gent (the Rabottowers) we encountered this phenomenon. Since there can exist an influence in two directions, it is possible that certain people get caught in what is called a ‘negative spiral’.

d. Residents’ characteristics

Effect of the liveability dimensions on the composition of the population

It is argued that the state of the patrimony and the maintenance of the environment have an effect on the characteristics of people that will move into the concerning residential area. Also the image (of problem area) plays a role with regard to the influx of new tenants. People having an urgent need for housing (mostly lower income households) will more easily move to neglected, polluted residential areas than those who can afford to wait for a longer time. According to our key informants, waiting lists are shorter for residential areas beharing a negative image. Because of this ‘effect in two directions’ it is possible that a negative spiral is getting started.

e. External factors

Our cases also point out that the functioning of several services and authorities has a possible influence on the liveability of social residential areas, regarding all four dimensions (‘external factors’).

From the Rabotcase we learn that the unclear communication of the social housing association about the renovation plans evoked irritation and insecurity about the future, leading to less neighbourhood engagement. Also, social housing associations with more financial means have more possibilities to address liveability, for instance by hiring social workers or caretakers.

Also the attitude of the ‘justice of the peace’ is said to play a role with regard to the level of liveability. The justice of the peace can give priority to the protection of vulnerable tenants, which may yield difficulties for the social housing association’s policy regarding eviction. This phenomenon occurred in the Klaverweide case.

According to our respondents, the level of cooperation between welfare organizations and social housing associations has an effect on liveability. If, on demand of the social housing association, potential problem tenants can be offered housing guidance by welfare organizations, many problems can be prevented or dealt with in advance. Also in case of effective troublemaking it is important that social tenants can be referred to a welfare organization. Logically, the capacity of welfare organizations plays a crucial role in this matter.
3.2 Measures to deal with liveability problems

As our cases-studies illustrate, the magnitude, nature and causes of liveability problems are different for each social housing area. As a consequence, for every social housing area a sized solution is necessary. Also, since the ‘liveability issue’ is shown to be a complex phenomenon, a good solution strategy always comprises a carefully composed basket of measures. In this sense, we talk about ‘an integral approach’ to tackle liveability. Furthermore, the solution strategy needs to be in line with the results of the problem-analysis. If the analysis for instance shows that problems primarily arise from features of the physical environment, the strategy needs to start from there.

In this part, we restrict ourselves to a brief summary of the measures that are said to be important for guaranteeing or improving liveability, in our cases. Only the possibilities of a more flexible allocation policy will be discussed in more detail.

Measures targeted at the manipulation of the residents

The measures targeted at the residents’ behaviour, attitude or perception that are listed in table 2 are not all operational in our three cases, but are mentioned by several key informants as necessary parts of an integral approach for dealing with liveability. The measures are not listed per liveability dimension, simply because each measure has an effect on several dimensions.

Table 2. Measures targeted at the manipulation of the residents’ behaviour, attitude or perception.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direct measures</th>
<th>Indirect measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Housing guidance</td>
<td>Bringing people together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities for youngsters</td>
<td>Creating participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House visits by social housing</td>
<td>Appoint an approachable person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>associations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Renovation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong welcome policy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The measures, targeted at changing the tenants’ behaviour, attitude or perception, can be divided in those with a direct and those with an indirect effect. Direct measures that are considered to be important by our key informants, are ‘housing guidance’, ‘activities for youngsters’ and ‘house visits by the social housing associations’. Providing housing guidance and performing house visits is especially considered to be important for dealing with problem tenants. It is argued that, if the house visits are carried out by the social housing association, pressure to adapt one’s behaviour will increase. Further, activities for young people are considered crucial in order to reduce inconvenience caused by youngsters ‘hanging around’.

The indirect measures that are argued to be important can be categorized as ‘bringing people together’, ‘creating participation’, ‘appoint an approachable person’, ‘renovation’ and ‘strong welcome policy’. If the social tenants can rely on an approachable person, they will feel less ‘left alone’, which could have positive effects for the level of engagement according to our informants. Also the application of a
strong welcome policy is said to contribute to the level of engagement. Further, renovation is considered important for those apartment blocks that are argued to be degenerated. Logically, initiatives that bring people together are said to be important for enhancing social cohesion and reducing social isolation.

**Measures targeted at changing the residents’ composition**

*Possibilities of a more flexible allocation procedure*

In our cases, we observed three possibilities to adjust the residents’ composition by means of the allocation procedure. Two social housing associations worked with ‘target figures’, whereas another one made use of a restricted system of ‘putting-in’ and a procedure to refuse certain candidate households.

A first option for creating a ‘social mix’ is to work with *target figures*. This technique includes the drawing of maximum or minimum percentages with regard to certain residents’ features. In this reasoning, minimum percentages are set for resident characteristics that are regarded as constructive in terms of liveability. For example, one can strive for a maximum of 50% foreign households or for a minimum of 20% ‘active’ households. In two of our cases, maximum percentages were used for foreign households, in order to prevent the creation of homogeneous ‘foreign neighbourhoods’. This policy option is not legal, but these two social housing associations argue that demand for social housing is relatively much higher in this foreign population (and that this would lead to ghettos eventually) and added that they get political support for this measure.

A second option to manipulate the residents’ composition is the use of what is called ‘putting-in’. Within such a system, the renter chooses who is placed where, taking into account the profiles of the current social tenants and the future tenant. The aim is to create a stable living environment (Adrianow, 1993). In order to use this system, the renter needs to have ideas about the ideal constellation of tenants, since the renter decides what kind of tenant-profile preferably gets in. For instance, one can decide to avoid families with children next to old singles, or avoid unemployed households in settings where already several unemployed are living. In one of our cases, the social housing association worked with a weak version of the ‘putting-in’ system, as legal possibilities are limited in Flanders.

In order to apply the first two, one needs to have certain ideas or a vision about the ideal resident composition concerning liveability. This ‘ideal composition’ can be a certain social mix but also a homogeneous population regarding certain characteristics. The vision about the ideal composition or/and the changes that are needed should result from a problem-analysis including all relevant actors.

A third way to influence the residents’ composition in order to safeguard liveability is to *refuse certain candidate households*, on the basis of their socio-economic profile or the tenant’s behaviour in the past. This is a procedure that was used in one of our cases. In the case at stake, the profile of the candidate tenant was drawn by a social worker when visiting the candidate tenant in his current living environment. If the social worker believes it is probable that the candidate will become a problem tenant,
he can advise the directive committee to refuse the candidate. In our view this procedure is problematic to an extent, since a high level of discretion is involved. Therefore, the social housing association should always guarantee that the refused candidate finds a proper alternative.

4. Indicators/ determinants of liveability as a condition for a more flexible allocation system

Since the current policy option in Flanders states that a more flexible allocation system will only become possible for problematic social housing areas, one needs to have parameters than can be used to objectify these areas. The analysis of our cases points out that the ‘liveability issue’ is a complex phenomenon that can not be reduced to a bunch of figures. Therefore, according to our insights, a profound problem-analysis with all relevant actors involved should always take place to classify social housing areas as ‘problematic’. In order to underpin these problem-analyses, certain figures (indicators/determinants of liveability) should be included. However, this can never replace a profound problem-analysis. In this chapter we indicate which data and data-sources can be used for this purpose.

First, we present a list of all possible data-sources for indicators of liveability. This is the result of a screening of all relevant Flemish/ federal surveys, administrative databanks, meta-databanks and policy documents. Next, we present our insights concerning indicators and determinants of liveability, resulting from our three case-studies.

Subjective indicators

In order to work with subjective indicators of liveability on the level of social housing areas for the whole of Flanders, one ideally needs a representative survey that scrutinizes liveability for every social housing area. In Flanders, such a large survey design does not exist. Moreover, setting up such a research design for the whole of Flanders seems not feasible from a financial point of view.

Our screening of all potential sources of subjective indicators of liveability yielded two possibilities. First, one can make use of the Socio-economic survey 2001, which includes information for all Flemish households on the level of statistical sectors. The survey includes questions about the satisfaction with quality of the dwelling, the physical environment and the level of services in the neighbourhood. Secondly, across Flanders some local liveability studies, using a representative sample and survey on neighbourhood level, are carried out. These studies often had social housing areas as a research unit.

Objective indicators

Regarding objective indicators of the quality of the dwelling, information can be used from the Socio-economic survey 2001, and the technical inventory of the social rent patrimony of the Flemish Housing Corporation (VHM). With regard to objective indicators of the quality of the physical environment, local registration procedures can be applied, such as litter registration or police registration of illegal dumping. Further,
if the SHC’s have developed a ‘complaint registration system’, this can be used to capture the quality of the social environment. Finally, the level of safety can be objectified by using local police statistics. However, the federal database concerning crime statistics does not deliver data on the level of statistical sectors.

**Indicators: insights from our case-studies**

*Turnover* within a social housing area can be applied as an objective indicator of liveability, if the reasons for moving out are known. For turnover in social housing areas can have several causes. It can be sign of dissatisfaction with the residential environment but households can also move out because they enlarge or reduce in size. On the other hand, people may live in an unliveable neighbourhood and still do not have the means to get out. In one of our cases – Klaverweide – the social housing association applied a questionnaire concerning motives/ reasons to move out the social housing area. All households that move out are asked to fill in the questionnaire. If the response is satisfactory and if can be assumed that people give honest answers, ‘turnover because of liveability reasons’ can be used as an objective indicator of liveability.

Theoretically, the *number of problem tenants* within one residential area or apartment block, can be an objective indication of liveability. For it is argued in our three cases that there is a limit to the number of problem tenants one neighbourhood can cope with. However, it is not easy to define criteria for identifying someone as a ‘problem tenant’. And if certain criteria are agreed upon, it is still not clear what number or percentage of problem tenants is considered problematic.

**Determinants of liveability: insights from our case-studies**

In total we hold back – based on the insights from our case-analyses and taking into account the possibilities to measure the variables - 5 possible determinants of liveability. Two of them are related to the physical quality/characteristics, while the other three are related to the resident composition. These determinants were already presented in paragraph 4.2, concerning causes of liveability problems. In this part we will add if and how these characteristics can be measured.

As extensively argued in our cases, the level of the *acoustic isolation* plays an important role with regard to the social quality and the residential satisfaction. Furthermore the level of acoustic isolation is perfectly measurable. However, it is also argued that costs for such a measurement are high.

Our case-studies put forward that the *density* of the resident population has a crucial effect on liveability. Communal problems (conflicts) were more frequent in the high-rise areas Rabot and Den Dam than in the low-rise Klaverweide. The density of the population is relatively easily measured.

The *social capacity of the residents* is argued to play a role with regard to the level of liveability. Since social capacity is an abstract concept, it can only be measured by means of certain indicators. According to our view, the variables used as indicator for

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*3 De politiële criminaliteitsstatistieken (PCS).*
social capacity should result from a problem-analysis including all relevant actors. Our key informants argued that household income, state of employment and family-type (% lone parents) are possible indicators of social capacity.

From our case-studies we learn that that a concentration of children in social housing and certainly high-rise estates, yields problems of liveability. Especially when in the same building a high percentage of elderly – with a contrasting lifestyle – is situated. Thus, the ratio young-old might influence the level of liveability. The social housing associations have the necessary information to calculate age ratios.

Finally, the resident composition regarding origin is said to influence liveability, if residents do not have the opportunity to interact with people of the community (by origin) one feels attracted to. In our study, we only investigated housing areas with a mix of several communities. Our informants argued that people in general did not seek social contacts across communities. Further, our study points out that nationality is not a suited criterion for detecting a household’s origin, due to Belgium’s nationalizing policy. In our three cases, a substantive part of the foreign community got the Belgian nationality, while – according to our respondents – still being part of the foreign (Turk/Moroccan) community.

Discussion

Our case-studies showed that there is a wide diversity with regard to the nature and possible causes of liveability problems, that the liveability issue is a complex phenomenon and that the problems are specific for each social housing area.

Therefore, we argue that a more flexible allocation system can only be ‘part’ of an ‘integral approach’ for dealing with liveability in social housing. In this matter, it should also be noted that the use of a more flexible allocation procedure includes a risk that socio-economic weaker groups will have fewer chances for getting a social dwelling. In a housing system in which the social rental patrimony already figures as a safety net for vulnerable groups, one should deal carefully with this policy option.

As a condition for allowing social housing associations to apply a flexible allocation rules we suggest a profound problem-analysis is made by the social housing association in cooperation with all relevant actors: local authority, local welfare organizations, community work etc. This problem-analysis should be underpinned with relevant figures, which can be either indicators or determinants of liveability. With regard to indicators, one can rely on local registration, certain federal/Flemish databases or turnover figures that can be interpret. Regarding possible determinants of liveability, the problem analysis should clarify what residents’ or environmental characteristics can be referred to. Our case-studies revealed five possible determinants of liveability that can be measured in one way or another: acoustic isolation, population density, social capacity, ratio young/old and composition regarding origin.
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