

Evaluation of the Cooperation Programme of Wohnbauinitiative for Seestadt Aspern

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MA 50, Referat für Wohnbauforschung und internationale
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Summary

“CALL Wohnbauinitiative 2011“- Housing Initiative 2011 New ways of financing housing construction for affordable quality housing

The current historically low rent level offers the chance to provide independently financed apartments on favourable rental terms and with the same quality as subsidised housing construction. The City of Vienna called upon limited-profit building associations and commercial developers to provide affordable apartments – “Call Wohnbauinitiative 2011”. The City made available 800 euros per square metre of housing to the companies. The “Call” is a new way of financing housing construction which also has consequences for the planning process.

“CALL” in the new Seestadt Aspern: 1,500 apartments - Commitment to rent ceilings and high quality

Nine limited
-profit housing companies with fourteen architect teams and
three landscape architecture offices declared themselves
willing to plan and construct around 1,500 apartments on the
“Wohnbauinitiative” / Housing Initiative model in Vienna’s new

urban quarter Seestadt Aspern – this is approximately a quarter of the volume of the new town. The developers committed themselves to rent ceilings and maintaining the usual high urbanistic, architectonic, ecological and social quality levels in Vienna and to participating in a **new planning procedure to safeguard the agreed quality levels.**

**Safeguarding quality:
The “Cooperation Programme”**

Quality should be safeguarded by the cooperation of all participants – thus to a certain extent through self-control based on the companies’ interest to have sustainable housing projects in their portfolios.

And:

Quality should be guaranteed by the active participation in the planning process of an advisory board and external experts.

**7 months:
From the beginning of the Cooperation Programme to application for planning permission**

With this programme within a few months – from November 2011 to May 2012 – the urban configurations and the building plans were worked out and prepared for application for planning permission.

1. Quality and Process

Processes cannot be developed independently of their intended aims. Content and form, aims and means cannot be separated. Processes must also be further developed because there are no timeless and universal criteria for quality and the financial framework also changes.

**Quality through competition:
The discrepancy between model and practice**

Competition, the free market, is regarded as a suitable process to find concepts for urban development and construction planning.

Advantage: the choice between different ideas when many “good” planners take part

Hopes are placed on the individual and comprehensive creativity of the designer finding the “best” solution with regard to function, economy, ecology and design. In customary

'Housing Development Competitions' in Vienna the developers compete for building sites and public funding. The benefit for the awarding authority lies in being able to choose between various solutions to a complex task. The assumption is that enough "good" contestants take part. It can otherwise happen that the submissions are similar to one another and no "good" solution is proposed at all.

Ideal model and management

The most important principles of a competition are: equality of opportunity for all participants, evaluation of the designs by an independent and qualified jury and anonymity of the participants. In practice these principles can hardly be upheld. Since there have been competitions there has been criticism of incomplete or imprecise invitations to tender, superficial or tactical adjudication, unacceptable grounds for decisions, the reluctance of juries to decide and the undue influence on the process exerted by the character traits of the jury members. The winning designs must often be "readjusted".

Competition for urban neighbourhood planning?

Recently, however, the view has prevailed that competition is not suitable for complex tasks such as planning an urban neighbourhood. A combination of cooperation and competition, a two-stage competition, has been implemented – cooperation in the first stage, competition in the second. Nevertheless, this does not change the general problems of the process. The value-added chain between urban planning and structural engineering also remains broken.

No guarantees for the awarding authority and much time and effort

It is a risky process for the awarding authority because the quality of the result is not guaranteed. The competition is also an acquisition instrument and this also has a determining influence on the content. In addition, the time and effort for all participants in terms of material and emotions is very high, especially for architects.

Quality through cooperation: Economic advantages with the same quality standard

Cooperation is plainly the way to get the highest possible benefit with the lowest possible use of resources. Cooperation is defined as the voluntary working together of independent companies who surrender a part of their sovereignty for a particular period of time. The purpose of cooperation is, through the joint development of a plan, to achieve economic benefits which would be denied to companies acting in isolation. One side-effect of cooperation is the increase of professionalism and quality in the working process, which is likely to become more and more important in future.

Preconditions for cooperation

The cooperation partners form a temporary system in which the rights, obligations and forms of communication are regulated. An important element for successful cooperation is “trust” – an element that does not exist in competition. The precise stipulation of aims, a clear definition of the company profile, and the competence of the staff are preconditions for cooperation.

Ideally cooperation will include as many links in the value-added chain as possible, ranging from neighbourhood planning to building design and to use.

Cooperation: indispensable for complex tasks

Cooperation is imperative for urban planning projects because of the spatial, technical and financial intersections. Cooperation is also necessary in the design of buildings when a larger plot is to be divided into several building sites. Cooperation should guarantee that the fixed points of urban planning are observed and that at the design stage the individual elements are already appropriately planned so that no readjustments are necessary.

2. The “Cooperation Programme”

The aims of the Aspern planning

An urban town

The objective is that Seestadt Aspern should be an urban town. The basis is the master plan of the Swedish planner Johannes Tovatt arising from a competition. Another document called “Partitur des öffentlichen Raums” (“Public Space Musical Score”) shows how Aspern’s urban spaces could be designed. However, the zoning classification based on the framework plan provides wide scope for interpretation, e.g. also in the division of building areas into individual building sites. In the background is the image of the “Viennese block”.

The urban city is not an architectural patchwork

Urbanity cannot arise from a patchwork of widely different architecture but only when the individual buildings relate to each other on the basis of a body of rules and standards. The central thesis of the Cooperation Programme is thus:

The quality of the individual elements only emerges in the context of the whole, the quality of one element depends on the quality of its neighbours.

The cooperative planning process also ultimately derives from this: cooperation is indispensable when there is plenty of

scope for interpretation at the zoning stage, meaning that there are few rules or, as in Aspern, the zoning is on the one hand rather open on a large scale but on the other, stipulations are made for example about the ground floors.

The principles of urban building structures

In addition the most important principles of urban building structures were described such as: orientation of the apartments towards the street, small-scale structures and an attractive address, whereby the scale and the “granularity” were not defined. The spatial scales must be compatible with the size and the structure of the developer. In addition, the scales of urban elements should also be seen in the context of the history type of building structure in Vienna.

Process of the “Cooperation Programme”

Project management

The developers commissioned a company to manage the cooperation process which is itself involved in the construction via financial interests. With funding from the developers, the process management contractor commissioned external experts for quality control during the “Cooperation Programme”. The City convened the Wohnbauinitiative / Housing Initiative Advisory Board for quality control. There was no jury.

4 Phases

The “Cooperation Programme” has four phases:

Phase 1 Involvement of the participants in the “Cooperation Programme”

This phase was devoted to information and discussion of the objectives for Seestadt Aspern among participants. The planning teams and developers were able to address the consequences of the urbanity criteria for building design, not receptively, but in workshops.

Phase 2: Finding ideas for all construction sites

In this phase urban configurations were designed on the basis of the previously mentioned criteria. The designs were intensively discussed and brought together into a working model at workshops with all participating teams, the external experts and – a novelty – members of the “Wohnbauinitiative/Housing Initiative Advisory Board”. The spatial intersections were worked on cooperatively for as long as it took until all the teams and experts were satisfied with the result. Later readjustment was thereby avoided.

Phase 3 Draft planning with “intermediary design consultation”

In this phase the individual drafts were brought to the preliminary design stage with the consultation of experts and members of the Advisory Board. Teams from neighbouring construction sites also cooperated in this phase.

Phase 4 Evaluation by the “Wohnbauinitiative / Housing Initiative Advisory Board”

The results of the work were presented at a public meeting of the “Wohnbauinitiative / Housing Initiative Advisory Board” concluding the “Cooperation Programme”. In a technical dispute with the planners, the Advisory Board made their last suggestions for improvement to individual designs.

3. Results: Preconditions for and Advantages of Cooperation

Preconditions for cooperation

Analysis of the “Cooperation Programme“ showed the necessary preconditions for “successful” cooperation.

A common aim

Cooperation presupposes that the cooperation partners have agreed upon a common aim. It must be clear that the aim can best be achieved together.

An intensive discussion about the agreed objectives and the means of achieving them is therefore required at the beginning of cooperation. The guide plans, explanatory texts and illustrations, information etc. should be drafted as pragmatically as possible and in the evocative language of the cooperation partners.

Systemic and structural aspects

A system of equal partners is formed for the period of the cooperation. The structure and size of the participating companies and architect teams do not play a great role if the partners are cooperatively competent. This means that each partner must be prepared for a partial limitation of their sovereignty for the period of the cooperation, in that they work to the agreed rules. They could otherwise cause commercial damage to their partners and also disrupt the achievement of objectives – in this case, urbanity. Architects and developers who are used to competition, in which they seek to outdo other contenders with extravagant solutions, have great difficulty here. Especially the “old hands” at housing development do not find cooperation easy.

Management, rules, sanctions

Qualified project management is required for the organisation of the system of the cooperation partners and for their relationships to the environment. It is an advantage when the project manager is also commercially involved and familiar with the conventions and language of the cooperation partners.

All participants should work together on the basis of rules or articles of association. They are a safeguard for all partners. There should not be sanctions for the case that one partner deviates from the aims because they would damage all the partners. The best rules are of not much use if there is no trust between the cooperation partners. However, the Advisory Board should be provided with a veto in the case of a serious conflict.

The advantages of cooperation

Subject to these preconditions the principle of cooperation is far, far ahead of that of competition, as experience from Aspern also shows.

Intersections and gaps in the planning

The planning intersections can be worked on together during planning. Continual monitoring can be carried out to check that the desired urban planning and architectonic qualities will be achieved. Subsequent laborious changes can be avoided. New questions that always appear in all planning processes can be dealt with ad hoc and effectively for all cooperation partners together with the responsible authorities.

Cooperation should therefore include the whole value-added chain from urban configuration to architectonic design. The divide between urban and building design can be bridged through cooperation.

Planning and construction costs

Both planning costs as well as construction costs can be reduced through cooperation. Planning can be carried out without risk of rejection. This process is especially effective for architect offices. In addition to financial profit there are advantages such as greater professionalism for future methods of operation and the satisfaction of productive collaboration.

Many unnecessary construction costs arise due to gaps in the value-added chain, e.g. between urban planning and building design. These costs can be avoided through cooperation. In addition, there are many other opportunities for savings, such as bringing together the knowledge and experience of experts in the "Cooperation Programme".

Legitimation and quality control

The process provides wide legitimation for the decisions made on technical and political levels through its openness and the expertise of the cooperation partners. Experts and members of the Advisory Board have a double function in this: their continual participation provides quality control during the process and not only after a long period of work. Externally the Advisory Board is the body that legitimises the results – like the jury in a competition.

Innovation

In contrast to competition, cooperation provides opportunities for innovative solutions.

5. Future prospects: cooperation and competition

The “Cooperation Programme” is an alternative to competition. Cooperation and competition are based on totally different value systems. However, belief in competition is unbroken. The opinion that “there must be competition” holds firm.

Besides criticism of urban planning and architectonic competitions – lack of transparency, randomness, the sensitivities of jury members, high costs for architect offices etc. – it is being recognised that urban neighbourhood development cannot be carried out with competition, especially not with building site competitions. The task is too complex.

In order to maintain competition the attempt is being made to combine competition and cooperation. Urban quarter development is intended to be worked out “cooperatively”. Planning offices are invited to submit ideas and sketches. These are then discussed with a jury at presentation colloquia which then decides which offices proceed to the second stage of the process, the classical competition. Interest groups and residents can also be involved in the first stage – a politically desirable but questionable advantage from the technical point of view.

An old style jury, even when including stakeholders, decides according to the usual rules of competitions such as confidentiality etc. . Strategy and tactics remain in play because it is a matter of acquiring contracts or construction sites. In view of the dimensions of the task in hand, the awarding authority runs an unjustifiably high risk.

This combination is not cooperation in the sense of the “Cooperation Programme” and does not deliver the many advantages of cooperation illustrated above. Cooperation must include all links in the “value-added chain”.

The fact that old hands want to protect competition from real reform by reforming it a little is not surprising because “we are doing very nicely, thank you.” It offers reputation and income. Nevertheless, if a combination of cooperation and competition is to be considered in order to benefit from the advantages of cooperation, competition rules would first have to be fundamentally reformed.

It can also be said that there is a certain fatigue among competition participants, especially in the 'Property Development Competitions'. To quote an architect: “I don't want to take part in the ancient process of development competitions. One learns nothing and therefore also has no experience with planning in dialogue because a competition doesn't require it at all.”

If we would like to take a look into the future, it is certain that cooperation rather than competition can be expected because the complexity of the tasks will increase and new communication technologies will accelerate cooperative work.