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THE QUALITY OF HOUSING AT THE SUBJECTIVE LEVEL: AESTHETIC AND ECOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

ABSTRACT The quality of life and housing can be examined at two levels: the objective and the subjective level. This paper studies how residents evaluate the quality of housing in their neighbourhoods at the subjective level, regarding aesthetic aspects (neighbourhood attractiveness), ecological aspects (clean neighbourhood and environment) and citizen participation (planning and decision-making about the neighbourhood). The questionnaire used in this part of survey contained questions pertaining to these neighbourhood characteristics. Research findings are generally positive regarding ecological and aesthetic aspects of neighbourhoods. People are quite satisfied with the visual appearance, maintenance and cleanliness of their neighbourhoods. Citizen participation, on the other hand, is rated as weak, almost non-existent. The research shows that citizens need to play a more powerful role in the organization of life in their neighbourhoods. By shaping the space in which they live, people contribute to the total quality of housing.

Key words: quality of housing, subjective level of the quality of housing, aesthetic aspects of the neighbourhood, ecological aspects of the neighbourhood, citizen participation.

1. Introduction

Quality of life (QOL) is a highly complex concept and the subject of research of many authors. It consists of various components: housing, work conditions, nutrition and health, leisure time and recreation, education, commuting and transport. Among different philosophical and other definitions of quality of life, there are three which stand out (according to Diener and Suh, 1997): the first one explains that QOL means **following normative ideals** of philosophical and religious systems. It is based on certain social norms, present in every society at a certain period of time. The second school of thought believes that **following personal aspirations and preferences** best describes QOL. According to this idea, quality of life is based on individual pleasure and individual ability to acquire it. The third definition of QOL is based on **personal experience**: if a person experiences their life as desirable and good, chances are that it will turn out good. This approach is connected with the subjective tradition of well-being.

In this article, as can be seen from previous articles, we examine different aspects of the **quality of housing**, which is a relevant component of QOL. We look at objective indicators as well as personal aspirations and preferences, i.e. personal experience of residents¹. The research on the quality of life and housing was conducted in new housing estates/locations in the settlement network of the City of Zagreb and Zagreb County, which were built in the last two decades. The locations included the outskirts of Zagreb and the rest of the city, as well as three satellite towns Samobor, Velika Gorica and Zaprešić.² The research partly con-

¹ These aspects of QOL, as can be seen in previous articles are: immediate neighbourhood infrastructure and facilities, economy of time, household digitalization, leisure time and participation in cultural events.

² The research was carried out by the *Work group for urban and rural space* at the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb during 2014. The project was entitled *The quality of living in the settlement network of Zagreb* and it included the housing estates built since the 1990s and especially since 2000 in Zagreb, Velika Gorica, Zaprešić and Samobor. We examined the residents' satisfaction with their life quality by looking at primary and secondary neighbourhood infrastructure, facilities and services (quality of housing) and the following elements of QOL: work, leisure, public transport, migration, ecology and citizen participation.

tinues the work done by the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb in 2004.³

Ever since the mid 1990s and the Homeland War, Croatia has been going through a long process of transition and social transformation (changing roles of social actors who influence town development) at the local and regional to the national and global level (Seferagić, 2005; Hodžić, 2005; Župančić, 2005). Domination of some actors over the others is present especially in the City of Zagreb and can be seen in the quality of life, the quality of housing, the use of public space and spatial and social mobility of the population. **Political actors** (government or public sector) together with **economic actors** (investors) manage to a large extent the City of Zagreb and the surrounding towns. On the other hand, **professional actors**, who study space in their various academic disciplines and **civil actors** (citizens), have little or no say in decisions about the spatial changes, as previous studies show (Seferagić, 2007; Svirčić Gotovac and Zlatar, 2008; Svirčić Gotovac and Zlatar, 2013; Zlatar, 2014).

A powerful role of the market in the creation of housing policies calls for stronger engagement on the part of different professions to formulate and put into practice a new approach to the quality of housing, a “multi-disciplinary approach which is noticeable in recent research projects, for example on citizen participation in planning, or research on the quality of housing and subjective and objective parameters“ (Bonaiuto, Fornara and Bonnes, 2003; Marans, 2000, 2004 in: García-Mira, Uzzell, Eulogio Real and Romay, 2005:1). In Croatia this approach has not been fully accepted yet. Research on the quality of living should be integrated into **leading social, urban policies** and into environmental policies (Lawrence, 1995).

The quality of housing at the subjective level is in the focus of this paper. The research **hypothesis** is that residents of estates surveyed are largely satisfied at the subjective level with aesthetic and ecological aspects of their neighbourhoods and that they participate in decision-making processes. The hypothesis is supported by the fact that the research was carried out in new housing estates to which respondents moved in order to increase the quality of their housing and life in general.

³ See the article (author Svirčić Gotovac) entitled: *The quality of living in new housing estates in the settlement network of Zagreb*.

The focus is on the immediate housing environment (neighbourhood) and residents' subjective satisfaction with a) **aesthetic aspects of their neighbourhood** and b) **ecological aspects of their neighbourhood**. The third aspect, inseparable from the quality of living and housing, is **citizen participation** in the neighbourhood planning and decision-making (Seferagić, 1988). We also enquired into residents' ideas about **improving the quality of housing** in their neighbourhood. Their suggestions are concrete and valuable guidelines for the future city planning.

2. Subjective and objective aspects of the quality of housing: aesthetic and ecological components

In order to explain in more detail the difference between subjective and objective research of the quality of housing, we will briefly look at some authors who present several approaches to the quality of housing and see how aesthetic and ecological components are placed within these various approaches. Approaches to the quality of housing can be divided as follows (Rapoport; Watson, 1968 in: Lawrence, 1995:1655):

- (1) Those approaches that focus on the **point-of-view of the individual**, be it that of an architect, a building contractor, a housing administrator, or a resident. By this approach, people are meant to evaluate a specific residential environment.
- (2) Studies of the **material/quantitative characteristics of housing** in buildings or neighbourhoods in terms of their technological, functional and construction components.⁴ This approach often varies because technological and physical aspects of housing depend on cultural values, social conventions and individual preferences which change in time.
- (3) Studies of the **supply of housing** (annual construction output), of the cost of new residential buildings, of the rationale and outcomes of housing construction grants to public authorities and private firms and of housing subsidies and allowances to households.

⁴ In our research we examined the neighbourhood infrastructure and facilities and the household digitalization (articles...).

Apparently, the quality of housing can be evaluated objectively (elements such as primary and secondary neighbourhood infrastructure and facilities or household facilities and equipment). These are concrete material/quantitative parameters. Some evaluations are subjective (elements such as aesthetic and ecological aspects of neighbourhoods). These depend on the subjective impressions/experience of residents. It is important to consider both objective and subjective characteristics of the neighbourhood. To this purpose, some authors (Francescato, Weidemann, Anderson and Chenoweth, 1974; 1979 in: Cooper; Rodman, 1994:50) came up with a three-dimensional **model** in which the satisfaction of residents with the quality of housing is the result of the following:

1. objective **characteristics of residents** (their age/gender, socio-economic status)
2. objective characteristics of the **housing environment**
3. subjective assessment of residents regarding the **three aspects of the housing environment**: physical environment, housing management and relations with other residents.

This paper focuses on the third dimension of the model⁵, i.e. subjective assessment of the quality of life in terms of physical environment and housing management. **Citizen participation** is the term we use for personal engagement in housing issues and relations with other residents. Some studies emphasize that participation i.e. social organization is the key element of the quality of housing. It is also called **control over housing/households** (Cooper; Rodman, 1994).

For the same authors, subjective assessment of the quality of housing is defined by the following two elements:

- (1) Evaluation of the use value of residential buildings and their aesthetic value (extended to home surroundings: neighbourhoods).

Seferagić (1998:147) defines the use value of space from the sociological point of view: the most important thing for the town development is for people to live in it, while its “practical value is to constantly serve its inhabitants“. The town is **a public good** and that is its use value, regard-

⁵ The first and second dimension are explained in the two articles written by A. Svirčić Gotovac.

less of how many parts it consists of. The use value of towns also refers to their renewal. Urban renewal or revitalization inevitably increases the use value of towns, providing residents with useful facilities.⁶ Every renovated part, be it a new housing estate, a block of buildings, the historic town center or open public space, should get some new functions and facilities, yet protecting and preserving public space and green areas.⁷

Beside functionality, this element also emphasizes the residents' subjective evaluation of the neighbourhood appearance: are buildings run-down, too close to one another or aesthetically incompatible?

- (2) Evaluation of **health and well-being of residents** related to both external and internal conditions in the community.

These are, for example, ecological conditions, such as noise, air and water pollution or maintenance of green areas (parks).

In the light of these considerations, we come to the following assumption: "the quality of life of citizens depends on their ability to create and "defend" the use value of space, their homes and their home surroundings" (Cooper and Rodman, 1992b; Logan and Molotch, 1987 in: Cooper and Rodman, 1994:51). In other words, the quality of life and housing of every single resident depends on their personal engagement in matters regarding their neighbourhood.

3. Citizen participation

For all citizens the right to housing is a prerequisite for the feeling of "belonging to a place". Being deprived of quality housing also means being deprived of the right to fully experience urban life and be part of it (Rolnik, 2014). So, the next level of the quality of housing we address in this paper is **citizen participation**. By this term we un-

⁶ Alterations which do not improve the quality of life cannot be considered urban renewal (Zlatar, 2013).

⁷ Marginal groups, such as children, pensioners, invalids etc. require a subtle approach to environmental planning and management. They are the best indicator of the use value of social space (Dakić et al., 1989).

derstand residents making plans and decisions about their neighbourhoods (home surroundings). Survey questions asking residents about their activities and social engagement tried to establish the degree of their involvement in organization and management of their neighbourhoods.

Citizen participation is an important factor in the total evaluation of the quality of life and housing. “**A ladder of citizen participation**”⁸ (Arnstein, 1971) is the best known typology of eight levels of citizen participation in their neighbourhood or town. At the bottom rung of the ladder is non-participation or manipulation and at the topmost rung of the ladder is citizen control over their town or, in our case, neighbourhood. Non-participation (manipulation) level is when citizens have no influence at all on decision-making but are nevertheless persuaded that everything is done in their best interest. In passive participation, which is also quite common, they receive accurate information about the projects in their environment. In manipulation the picture is often embellished. The highest level of involvement is when citizens alone decide about their surroundings, where and what to build, when they initiate various projects (Arnstein, 1971).⁹

Unfortunately, social groups with little economic power (mostly citizens), have little or no choice in making decisions (de Matteis, 2011) and that is true for many countries, not only those in transition. Bassand (Bassand et al., 2001) believes that, as a rule, economic actors always initiate building projects and are leaders of spatial changes. Political actors, in case they support them, follow their lead and make decisions in their

⁸ A Ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1971) is divided into eight levels of participation: bottom rungs of the ladder (**non-participation**) are manipulation and therapy. After that comes **tokenism**: informing, consultation and placation of citizens. The highest degrees of **citizen power** are partnership, delegated power and citizen control.

⁹ The World Bank has, for example, its own **typology of participation** (World Bank, Participation Sourcebook, 1996, according to Sumpor and Đokić, 2008). A low level of participation implies governments informing citizens about the projects (one-way communication) and consulting them about the projects (two-way communication). A high level of participation is collaboration (shared supervision of decisions and resources). The highest level of participation, empowerment, transfers the supervision of decisions and resources from governments to citizens.

favour. Professional actors, though best qualified in matters of urban development and environment, merely agree with political and economic decisions. Civil actors, i.e. citizens, come last in the hierarchy.¹⁰ Naturally, the degree of citizen participation is directly connected with their influence on political decisions and, consequently, support or rejection of various projects.

For investors in construction business, quantity, not quality is always the top priority. Therefore, as we can see in one of the previous articles¹¹, the primary neighbourhood facilities index and the secondary neighbourhood index are average or below average. New housing estates have incomplete infrastructure and are often located on the town periphery. Not surprisingly, citizen participation in most of them is weak or non-existent.

Public sector should help provide better living conditions for people in those parts of town or new housing estates where the quality of life is low and the infrastructure insufficient (de Matteis, 2011). The development of these estates has to be managed in a way that allows citizen participation in all decisions concerning their home surroundings. The *bottom up* approach when citizens themselves decide on the development of infrastructure projects or appearance of their neighbourhoods is much more effective than the *top down* approach in which the city or the state play the leading role in construction projects. There are some techniques which may strengthen citizen participation. One way are “**professional public services** as a mediator or a missing link between political and economic actors and service users and their communities” (Bovaird, 2007:858). Petovar (2011) raises awareness of the importance

¹⁰ This is Bassand's division into four types of urban actors (Bassand, 2001): political, economic, professional and civil actors. **Political actors** are political leaders, political parties and their representatives, strong businesses with a lot of political influence; **economic actors** are representatives of (industrial) companies, owners of municipal land, banks, entrepreneurs, corporations, developers; **professional actors** are architects, urban planners, engineers, art historians, economists, ethnologists, anthropologists, sociologists and other experts for space; **civil actors** are (a) residents/users/citizens of different social positions, lifestyles, age, education and (b) civil organizations (NGOs).

¹¹ See the second article entitled “New housing estates in the settlement network of Zagreb- community infrastructure“ (author Svirčić Gotovac, A.)

of professional associations, independent organizations whose goal is to maintain the highest professional standards and protect their members who come under pressure to act in ways contrary to their professional ethics. They contribute to the continued development of their profession, collaborate on educational programmes and development strategies, support public hearings and expert discussions about key theoretical and practical issues of urban development. These associations can, beside establishing communication between the two types of actors, warn about possible problems with projects and act as educators of citizens. Education is the most important component in citizen participation. Another important way to increase citizen participation is to set up **systems of monitoring and evaluation of the construction process** (Đokić and Sumpor, 2008) which would check construction projects from the beginning to the very end. This would also allow for the evaluation of equal participation of all actors in the process of urban development.

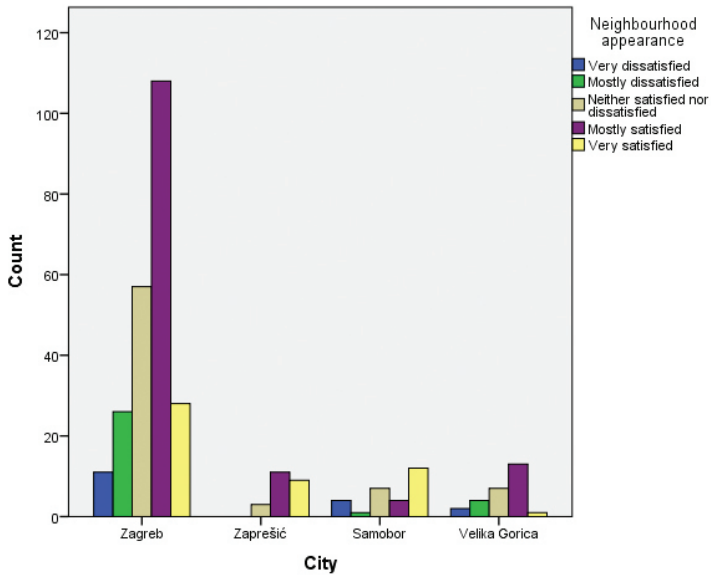
4. Research findings: aesthetic and ecological aspects of the quality of housing and citizen participation

4.1. Aesthetic aspects (neighbourhood appearance)

Housing is an important part of a healthy and attractive community while **sustainable housing** is defined as available, high quality, pleasant and which meets human needs. Besides, it has to satisfy ecological and aesthetic standards (Maliene and Malys, 2009), which are evaluated at the subjective level and analysed in this paper.

First we look at how residents estimate the following aesthetic components of their neighbourhood: general satisfaction with the neighbourhood appearance, how close buildings are to each other, age and deterioration of buildings, aesthetic compatibility of old and new buildings, graffiti on building facades and how close roads are to housing estates.

Graph 1.
Neighbourhood appearance



Picture 1.
Zaprešić, new part of the town, 'Kanadske kuće' (Canadian houses), the biggest satisfaction with the appearance of the neighborhood

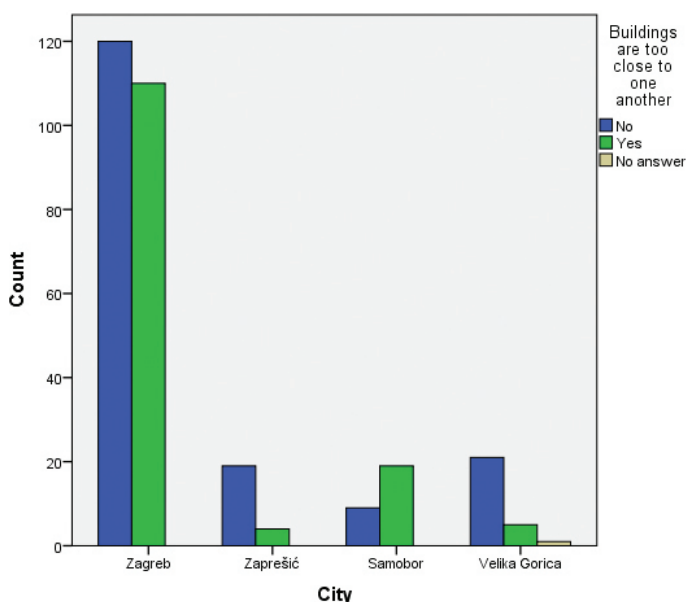


Source: <http://www.panoramio.com/photo>

From Graph 1 we can see that majority of all respondents are “mostly satisfied“ or “very satisfied“ with the appearance of their neighbourhood. In Zagreb, Zaprešić and Velika Gorica more than 50% of people are “mostly satisfied“ or “very satisfied“ with the appearance of their neighbourhood, in Samobor 42.9% of all residents are “very satisfied“ with their neighbourhood. So, in every town more than 50% of respondents are satisfied with their neighbourhood appearance.

Graph 2.

Buildings are too close to one another



44.8% of all respondents, especially those from new estates in Samobor (67.9%) and Zagreb (47.8%), think that buildings are too close to each other (Graph 2). This attitude can be explained by densification, which is the result of new infill buildings constructed between the existing ones, especially in Zagreb. A lot of “urban renewal“ examples (underground parking garages, shopping centres, high business towers) are examples of structures built as infill which clash architecturally with older, existing buildings. They have negative consequences on urban space: traffic congestion, difficult pedestrian circulation, social barriers.

Picture 2.

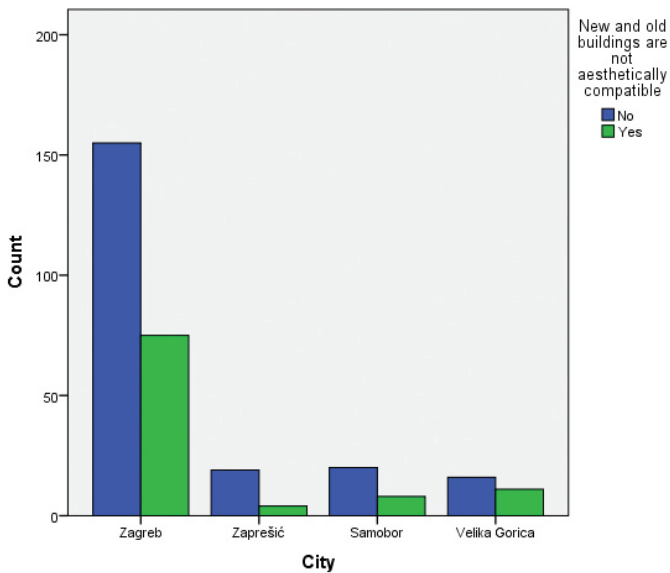
Samobor, new part of the town, buildings too close to one another



Source: <http://www.njuskalo.hr/nekretnine/samobor>

Graph 3.

Aesthetic compatibility of new and old buildings

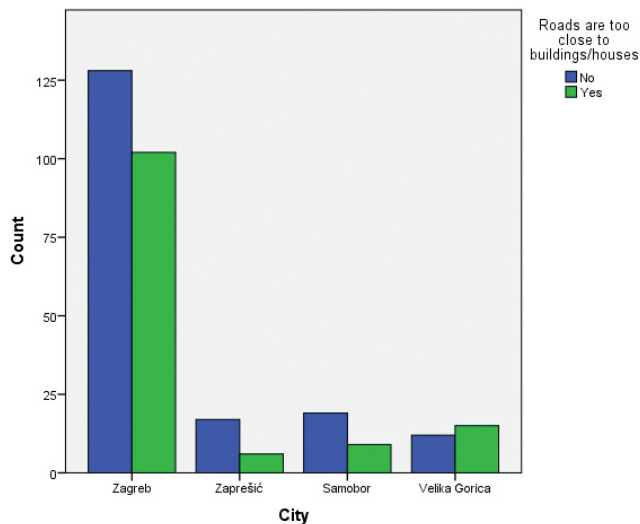
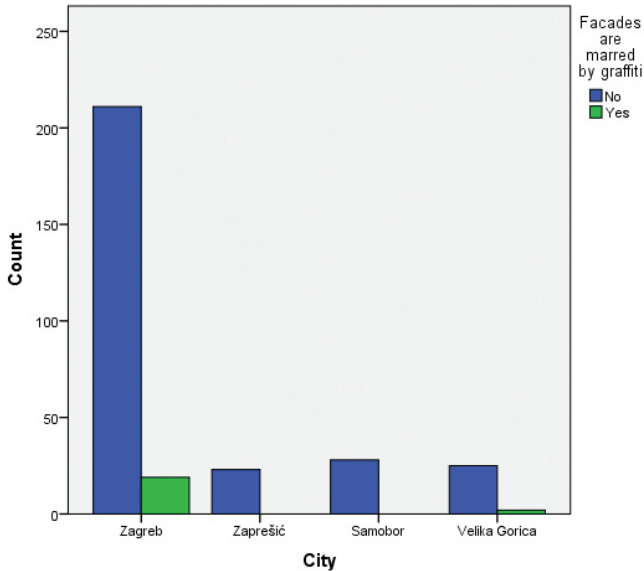


Most respondents (68.2%) believe that old and new buildings are aesthetically compatible (Graph 3). But 31.8% think that old and new

buildings do not go well together (in Zagreb 32.6%) because there are some estates with awkward new interpolations within the existing structures. In Velika Gorica a high percentage of people (40.7%) think that old and new buildings are aesthetically incompatible.

Graphs 4. and 5.

Facades are marred by graffiti and Roads are too close to buildings/houses



Most respondents in all four towns surveyed think that facades in their neighbourhoods are not marred by graffiti (Graph 4). As to the next question about roads being too close to buildings and houses (Graph 5), a high percentage of people in Zagreb believe they are too close (44.3%) and the highest percentage is in Velika Gorica (55.6%). Samobor also has a rather high percentage (32.1%) of people who believe that roads are too close to their houses or buildings.

Picture 3.

Velika gorica, new part of the town, roads too close to buildings/houses



Source: <http://www.njuskalo.hr/nekretnine>

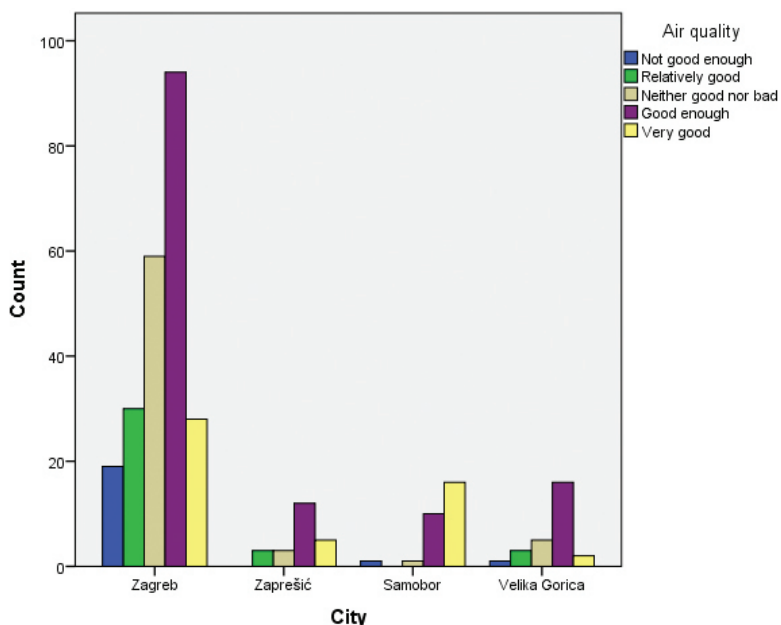
To sum up this part of research, residents are generally satisfied with the appearance of their neighbourhood. There are certain problems and difficulties residents complain about, e.g. high-density building (buildings are too close to each other), especially in Samobor and in Zagreb, and roads are too close to houses or buildings, especially in velika Gorica. Both these findings can affect the total quality of life in a negative way.

4.2. Ecological aspects

Beside aesthetic aspects of the quality of living and housing, we also look at ecological aspects and how residents subjectively assess that dimension of their living and housing.

We examined residents' evaluation of the following ecological components of their neighbourhood: air and water quality, absence/presence and maintenance of green areas, noise level (indicators of care for natural resources and safe environment) and satisfaction with maintenance, general cleanliness and garbage collection and removal in their neighbourhood (indicator of waste management).

Graph 6.
Air quality



In all towns surveyed respondents think that air quality is “good enough” but the most satisfied people live in Samobor where 98.2% of respondents think it is “good enough” or “very good” (Graph 6). In Zagreb, however, 40.9% of people think that air quality is “good enough”, 21.3% think it is “not good enough” or “relatively good” and 25.7% think it is “neither good nor bad”. Obviously, residents of Zagreb are the least pleased with the air they breathe. Respondents in Zaprešić (73.7%) and Velika Gorica (66.7%) believe that air quality is “good enough” and “very good”.

Picture 4.

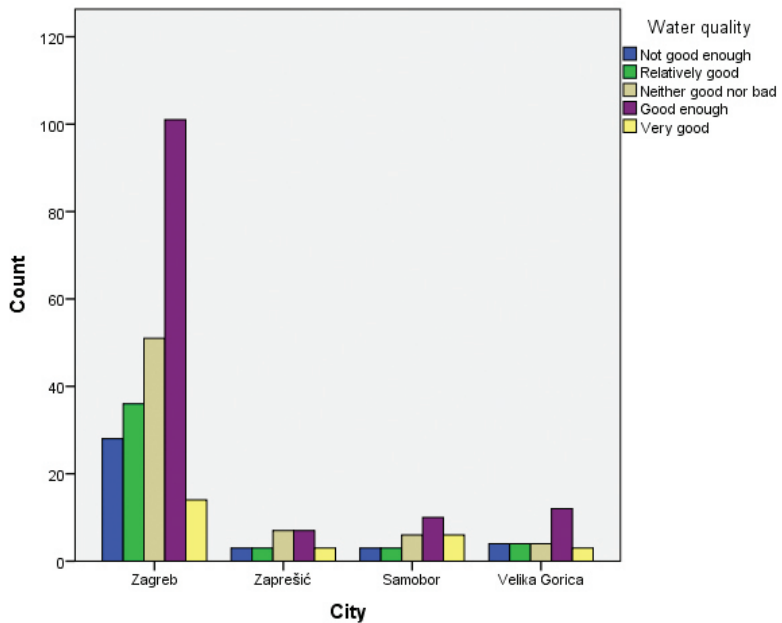
Samobor, the old city core, the biggest satisfaction with air quality and cleanliness of the neighborhood



Source: <http://www.tz-samobor.hr/novosti>

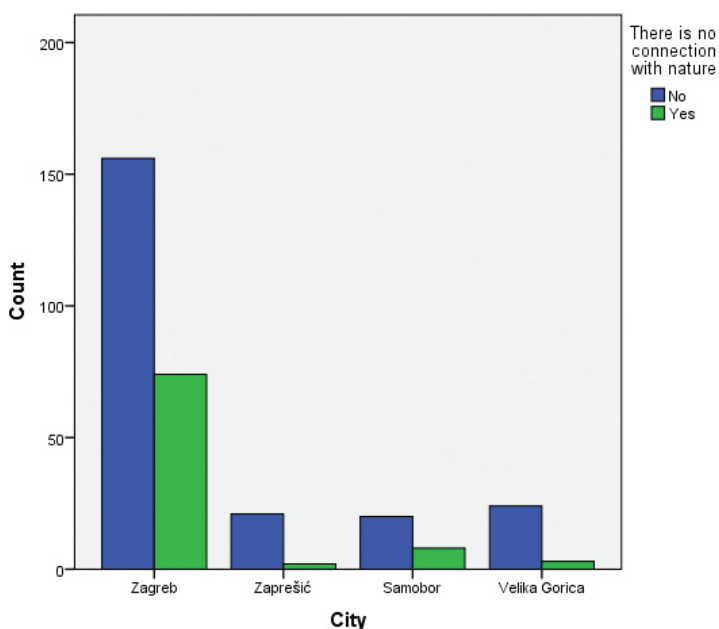
Graph 7.

Water quality



Regarding water quality (Graph 7), people are quite satisfied. Water quality is “good enough” or “very good” for the majority of residents in all towns: 50% in Zagreb, 57.1% in Samobor and 55.5% in Velika Gorica. Only the residents of Zaprešić think that water quality is “neither good nor bad” (30%) and “good enough” (30%). So in this town water quality is assessed worse than in other towns surveyed.

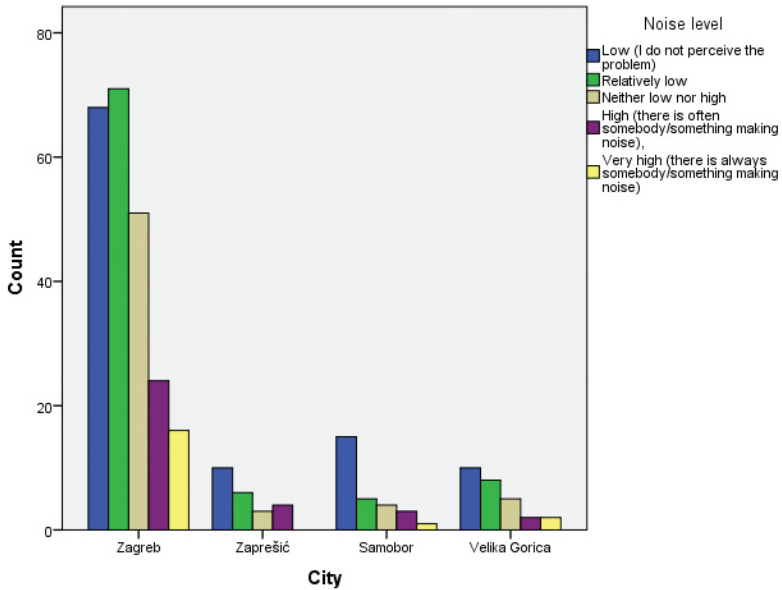
Graph 8.
Green areas/connection with nature



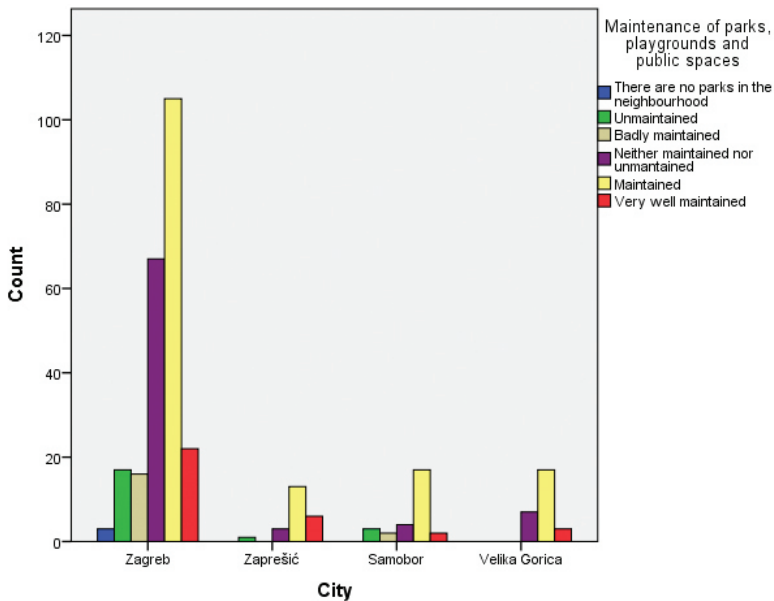
In all towns surveyed, more than 60% of all respondents believe that there are plenty of green areas and that they are connected with nature. In Zaprešić more than 90% of people think so (Graph 8).

The level of noise (Graph 9) is “low” or “relatively low” for more than 60% of residents of Zaprešić, Samobor and Velika Gorica, so they do not perceive it as a problem. Only in Zagreb the noise level is somewhat higher, i.e. 30.9% of people think it is “relatively low”, because Zagreb is bigger and therefore noisier than other towns. In Samobor the level of noise is the lowest (53.6% of respondents do not perceive it as a problem).

Graph 9.
Noise level

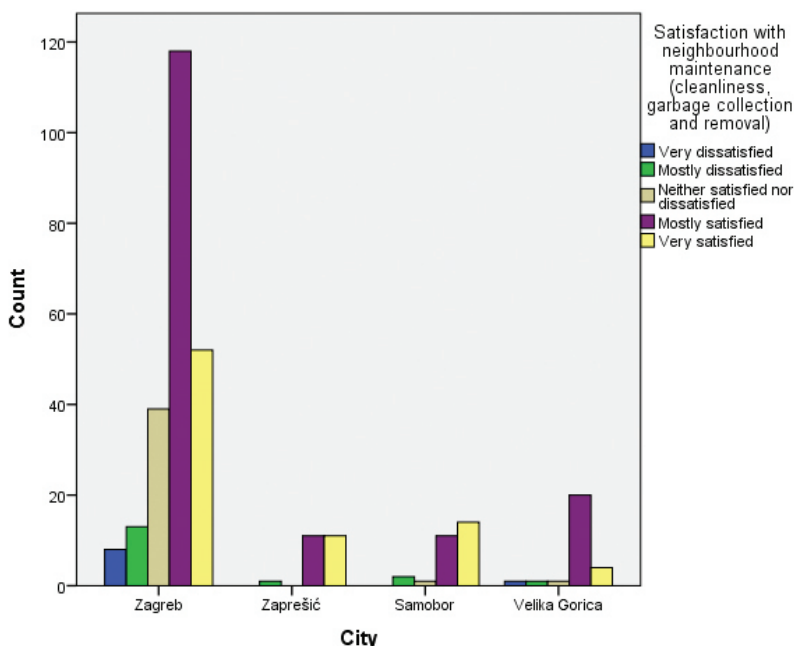


Graph 10.
Maintenance of parks, playgrounds and public spaces



As we can see in Graph 10, more than 60% of respondents think that these places are “maintained“ and “very well maintained“. However, 29.1% of residents of Zagreb and 25.9% of residents in Velika Gorica say that these places are “neither maintained nor unmaintained“ which suggests the situation is worse than in the other two towns.

Graph 11.
Satisfaction with neighbourhood maintenance (cleanliness, garbage collection and removal)



The last element we look at is neighbourhood maintenance (cleanliness, garbage collection and removal). In Graph 11 we can see that the majority of residents in all towns (more than 80% in all neighbourhoods) are “mostly satisfied“ and “very satisfied“ with neighbourhood maintenance. In Samobor 50% of residents are “very satisfied“.

In conclusion, the majority of respondents in all four towns are satisfied with ecological aspects of their neighbourhoods and believe that air and water quality is good enough. People in Zaprešić are a little less satisfied with water quality than the rest of respondents and in

Zagreb with air quality. This can be explained by factors which cause air pollution, such as the size of the city, population density and heavy traffic. People believe they are connected with nature and there are lots of green areas. The noise level is low (except in Zagreb, where it is “relatively low“, due to busy traffic). Parks, playgrounds and public spaces, as well as neighbourhoods, are well maintained, so residents are “mostly satisfied“ or “very satisfied“. Neighbourhoods are clean and tidy.

Economic, social, cultural and ecological dimension are the **four key dimensions of sustainable development** of a community¹² (Mackelworth; Carić, 2010). “**Environmental or ecological sustainability** is the carrying capacity of the environment and its long-term ability to cope with the pollution and use of natural resources“ (Starč, 1994:73). It is marked by certain indicators, e.g. use of space without danger for the environment, care for natural resources, waste management (Tonković and Zlatar, 2014).

4.3. Citizen participation

The strengthening role of the market (economic actors) in regulating housing construction has resulted in housing policies which have abandoned the idea of housing as a “public good“ Because of these policies, instead of focusing on those with limited resources, providing for them and thus distributing the wealth, the market has become an arena for the achievement of individual financial goals. By mobilization of various policies, housing has increased market competition to a degree unknown before (Rolnik, 2013).

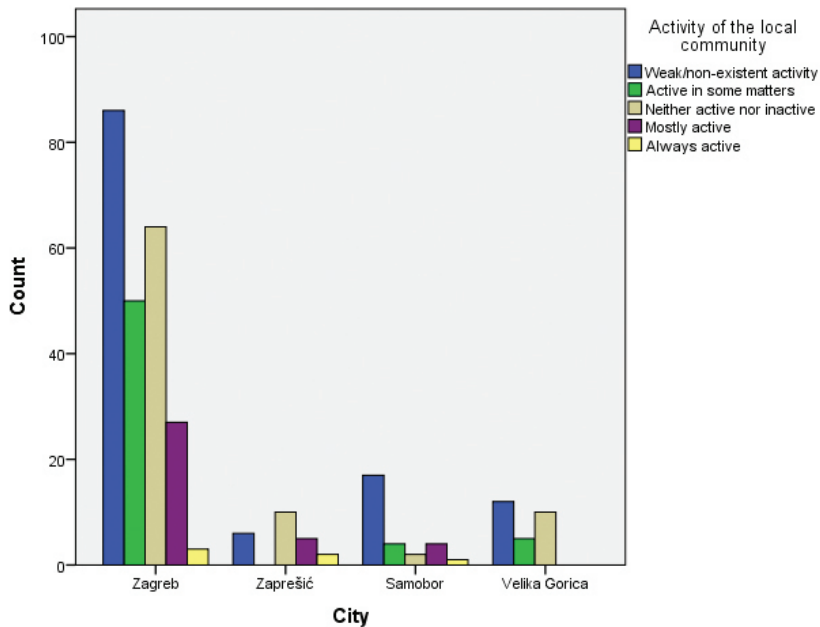
¹² **Economic sustainability** comprises the economic growth and efficiency essential for the long-term satisfaction of material needs, social security and consumption opportunities (Spangenberg, 2004). **Social sustainability** mostly comprises employment rate, education, training, income, social capital and social security (Spangenberg, 2004; Colantonio, 2009; Chiu, 2004; Boström, 2012; Murphey, 2012). As the fourth pillar of sustainability, **culture** encompasses both “documented culture“ (Williams, 1965) of historical monuments and cultural heritage and “culture of everyday life“ of the local community.

One way to weaken the market as a key economic actor and strengthen the role of civil actors (citizens) is citizen participation in decision-making processes in their neighbourhood and, consequently, in housing policies in general. Citizens of Zagreb participate in decision-making about their communities through local self-government organized in **city districts** and **local boards**¹³ (<http://www.zagreb.hr>). Citizen participation affects the quality of housing but it is also, together with social relations in a neighbourhood, part of the **social dimension of sustainability**, one of the four key dimensions of sustainability mentioned in the previous section. It consists of the following indicators: social infrastructure, social cohesion (feeling of togetherness), developed social capital and participation in decision-making processes (Spangenberg, 2004).

In our research we looked at the following components of citizen participation, which are connected with the above mentioned social dimension indicators: activity of the local community (indicator of developed social capital and participation in decision-making); who people contact first when confronted with problems in their buildings or neighbourhood, taking part in tenant meetings (indicator of social infrastructure and participation in decision-making); personal engagement in matters regarding neighbourhoods or buildings people occupy, participation in decisions about buildings and neighbourhoods (indicator of social infrastructure and participation in decision-making); local community initiatives (indicator of social cohesion and feeling of togetherness and developed social capital); how towns take care of their infrastructure and satisfaction with social relations in the neighbourhood (indicator of social cohesion, developed social capital and social infrastructure).

¹³ There are 17 city districts in the City of Zagreb. Residents of each district are represented by their City District Council whose members elect President of the Council.

Graph 12.
Activity of the local community

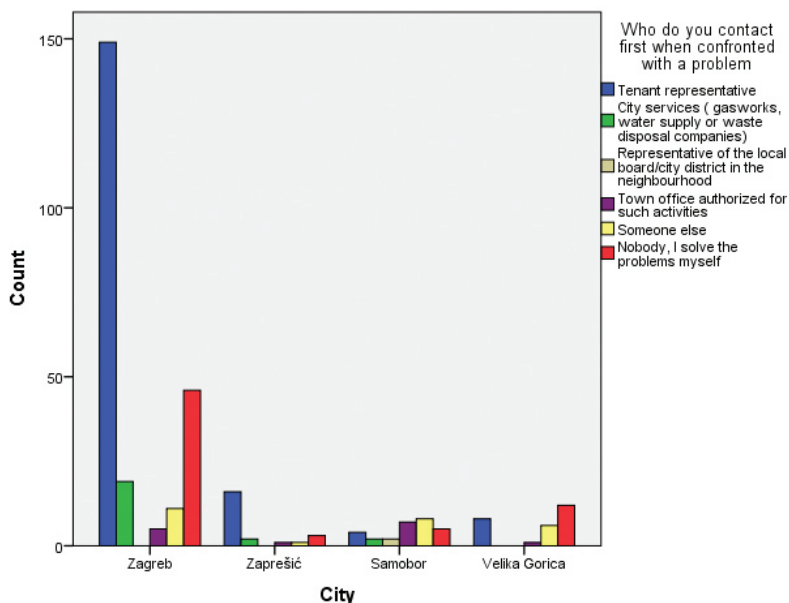


Activity of the local community (Graph 12) is “weak or non-existent“ in all towns (39.3% of all respondents say so) or the community is “neither active nor inactive“ (27.9% of respondents in all towns). In Zagreb, 37.4% of residents believe the community activity is “weak or non-existent“ and 40.5% believe it is “active in some matters“ and “neither active nor inactive“. The community activity is “weak or non-existent“ for most people (60.7%) in Samobor. In Zaprešić, the local community is “neither active nor inactive“ for 43.5% of people and “mostly active“ for 21.7% of people, which points to a bigger activity than in other towns.

“Local community self-organization is at risk because of neoliberalism and market dominance“ (Darcy and Rogers, 2014:2). That is why Rolnik (2014) brings back to focus the famous Lefebvre’s syntagm “*right to the city*“ (2009) and turns it to the “**right to housing**“ where quality housing becomes the central “battle“ which has to be won by all residents.

Graph 13.

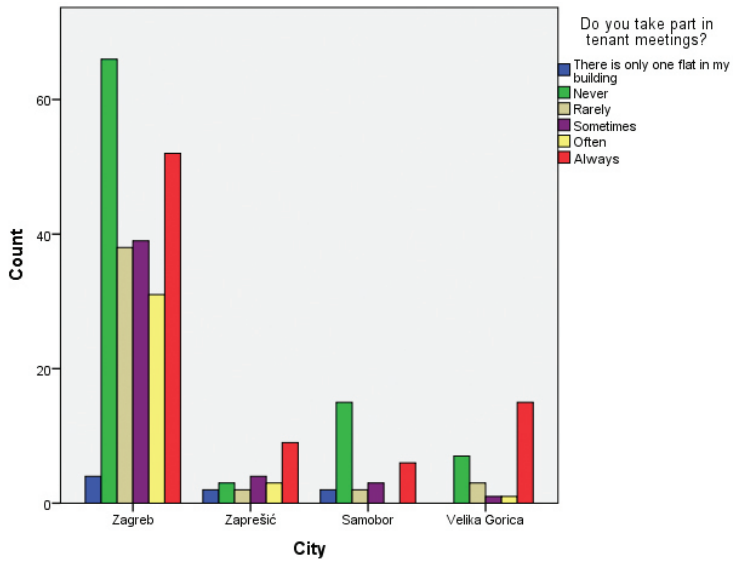
Who people contact (first) when confronted with problems in their buildings or neighbourhood



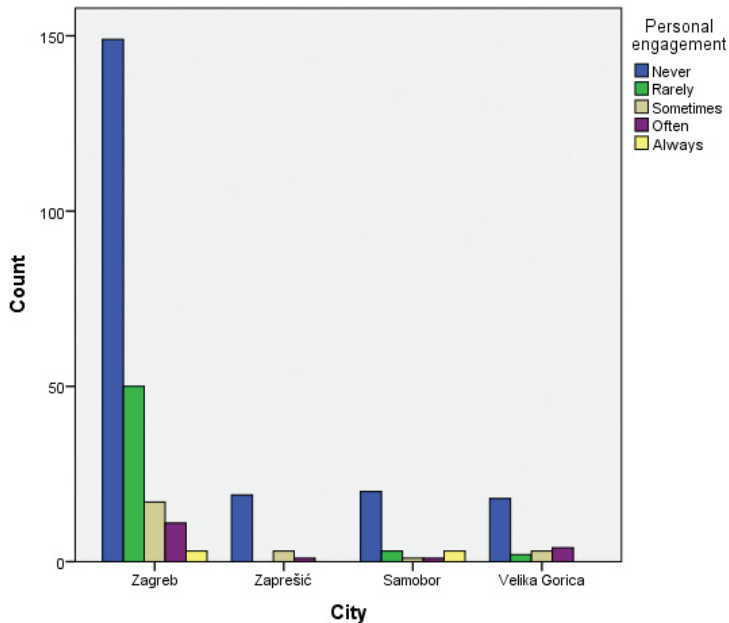
Most people first turn to tenant representatives, in Zagreb 64.8% and in Zaprešić 69.6% of people (Graph 13). It is logical because in the present system representatives of all occupants have to deal with problems occurring in the building. In Samobor most people contact “someone else” (28.6%), among others the town office authorized for such activities (25%). This can be explained by the fact that in Samobor most new residential construction are family houses rather than big buildings. In Zaprešić 44.4% of people solve problems on their own and 29.6% speak to tenant representatives. In Zaprešić there are also a lot of family houses (the so-called Canadian row houses).

In Samobor most residents (53.6) do not take part in meetings because a lot of them live in houses and not flats; for the rest, it can be a sign of indifference (Graph 14). In Zagreb we can notice a rather big polarization between those who always attend meetings (28.7%) and those who never attend meetings (22.6%). In Velika Gorica the percentage of tenants who always attend meetings is high (55.6%) and in Zaprešić it is also quite high (40%), more than one third of all residents.

Graph 14.
Taking part in tenant meetings



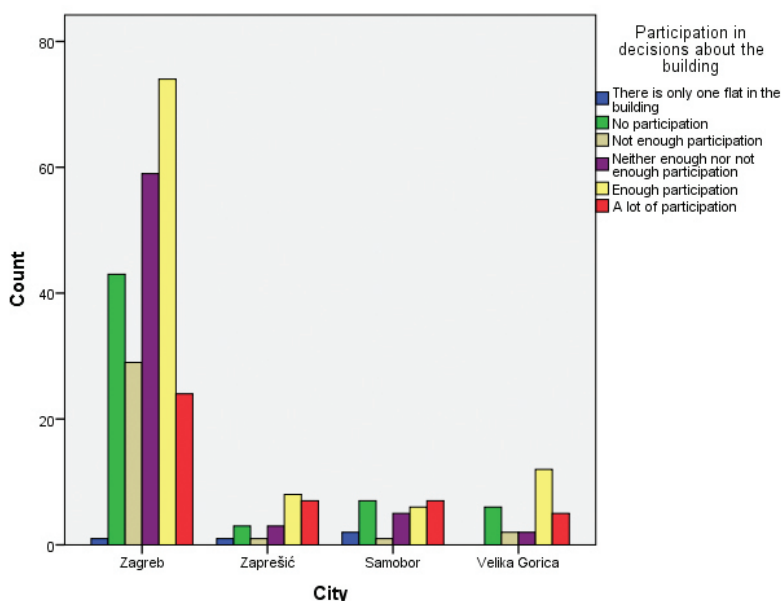
Graph 15.
Personal engagement



More than 60% of residents in each town never get personally engaged in matters regarding their buildings or neighbourhoods (Graph 15). This is evidence of weak citizen participation in planning and organization of life in their immediate home surroundings. Absence of personal engagement is visible in Zagreb (64.8% of all residents never get personally engaged) and especially in Velika Gorica (82.6%).

According to many authors, however, a town (especially a neighbourhood), should be a strategic zone where everybody (those with more and those with less political power) is free to express themselves.

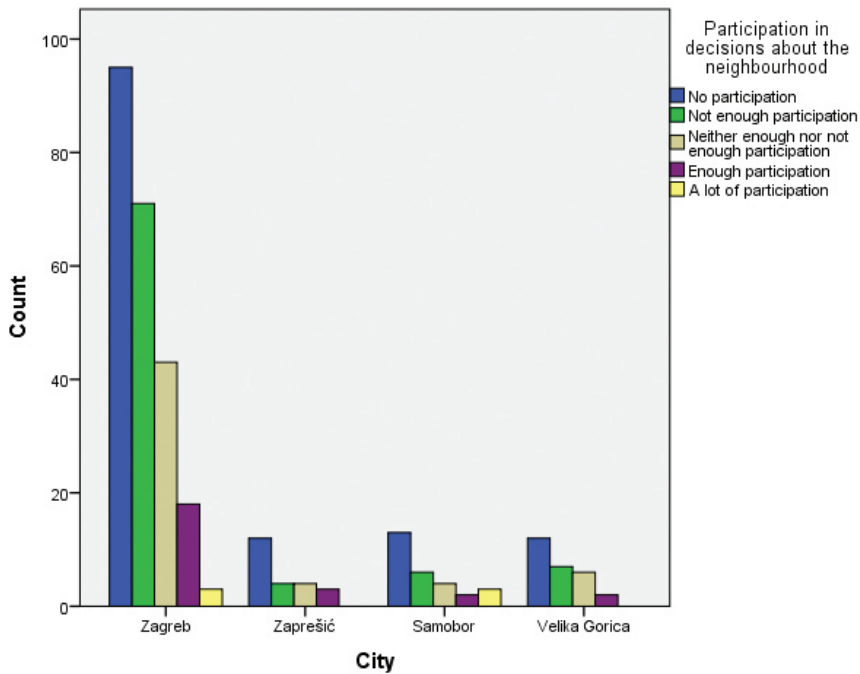
Graph 16.
Participation in decisions about buildings and neighbourhoods



Graphs 16 and 17 show citizen participation in decisions about their buildings and neighbourhoods.

In Zagreb 42.6%, in Zaprešić more than 50% and in Velika Gorica more than 60% of respondents believe there is “enough participation“ and “a lot of participation“ in decisions about their buildings (Graph 16). In Samobor under 50% of respondents think there is “enough participation“ and “a lot of participation“ and 28.6% think there is “no participation“ or “not enough participation“.

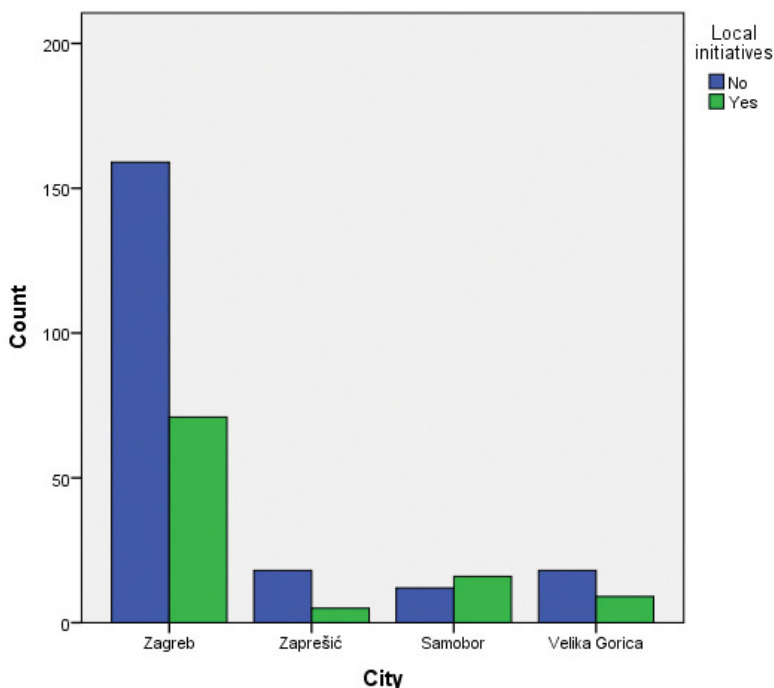
Graph 17.
Participation in decisions about buildings and neighbourhoods



When it comes to taking part in decision-making about their neighbourhoods, the situation is significantly different (Graph 17). Most respondents in all towns think that there is “no participation“ or “not enough participation“ in decisions about their neighbourhoods (in Zagreb 80% of all respondents, in Zaprešić 70.4%, in Samobor 67.8% and in Velika Gorica more than 70% of respondents). This is not unexpected because neighbourhood planning is managed by local urban policies which depend on higher authorities whose decisions do not necessarily coincide with people’s needs. It is easier to make decisions about individual buildings in which people live than entire neighbourhoods.

In most towns (Zagreb, Zaprešić and Velika Gorica) respondents think there are not enough local community initiatives about matters regarding neighbourhoods, which is in accordance with previous answers about little participation in decision-making about neighbourhoods (Graph 18). In Samobor 57.1% of people believe that local initiatives exist in their town.

Graph 18.
Local community initiatives



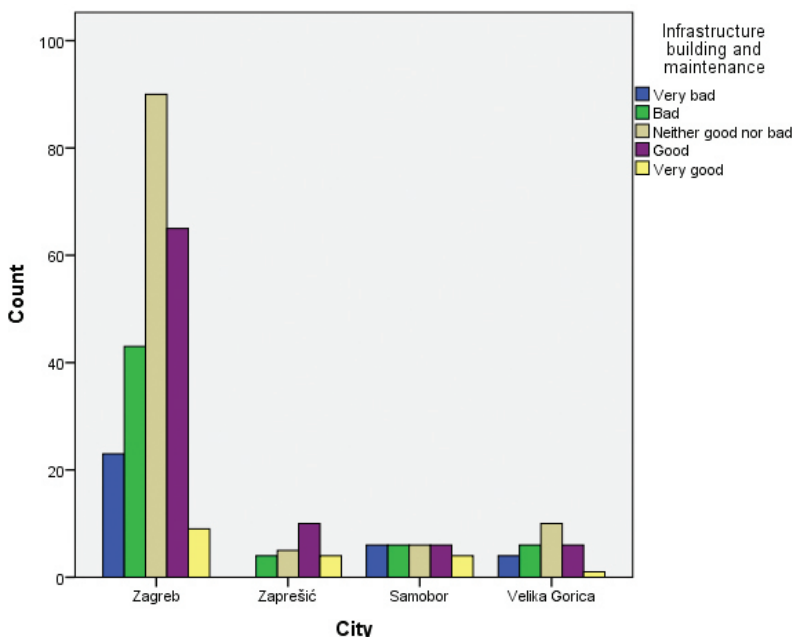
We also used an open-ended question about local community initiatives in order to get a closer look at them (Table 1).

Table 1.
Local initiatives

Zagreb	cleaning up housing estates, building kindergartens and schools, preservation of parks and green areas
Zaprešić	public lighting, cleaning up parks, building kindergartens and schools
Samobor	paving roads with asphalt and building sidewalks
Velika Gorica	building parks and schools

It is obvious that local initiatives are similar in all towns. They are usually about new kindergartens or schools, cleaning and preservation of parks and green areas, asphalt paving and sidewalks. These are elements of primary neighbourhood infrastructure and facilities and are crucial for residents' daily needs and their quality of living.

Graph 19.
Towns and their infrastructure

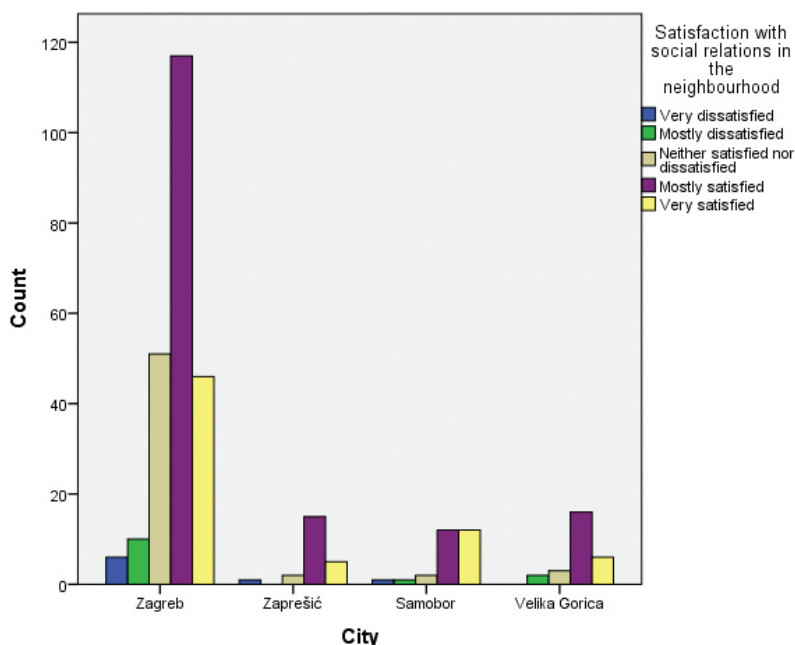


In Zagreb 39.1% of people estimate that the City takes “neither good nor bad” care of its infrastructure and in Velika Gorica 37% of people think the same (Graph 19). In Zaprešić, however, 60.9% of respondents think the town takes “good” or “very good” care of infrastructure. In Samobor opinions are divided because the same percentage of people (21.4%) believe the care about infrastructure is “very bad”, “bad”, “neither good nor bad” and “good”.

Most respondents in all towns say they are “mostly satisfied” or “very satisfied” with social relations in their neighbourhoods: in Zagreb 50.9%, in Zaprešić 65.2%, in Samobor 85.8% (both mostly satisfied and very

satisfied), in Velika Gorica 59.3% (Graph 20). High levels of satisfaction with social relations in the neighbourhood can be seen in all towns.

Graph 20.
Satisfaction with social relations in the neighbourhood



This section shows the non-existent or weak activity of the local community which affects the quality of living. “Participation of the public in spatial planning and decision making processes regarding their immediate environment has not been satisfactory for a while now” (Svirčić Gotovac and Zlatar, 2013:404). A new type of actors, **non-government organizations (NGOs)**, appear on the scene and come into conflict with economic actors, defending citizens’ interests and demanding equal participation of all actors (political, economic, civil and professional) in urban planning. Such balance of power is democracy. “In order to establish the balance of power and equality it is vital to change the socio-political system which, not being sufficiently legally and politically defined, does not encourage democracy, promotes some actors at the expense of others, thus strengthening the hierarchy of power” (Zlatar, 2013:180).

The quality of life can be considered lower if citizens/residents cannot influence decisions about the appearance or infrastructure of their housing environment because such control and influence are important elements of the quality of housing in general.

In Zaprešić, the local community is quite active (60% of residents are “neither active nor inactive“ or “mostly active“). When confronted with problems in their buildings, a large percentage of people first turn to representatives of building occupants and some people deal with problems on their own. Taking part in tenant meetings varies from one town to another. This is not surprising considering different situations with occupants and their representatives in different housing estates. However, a large percentage of people, especially in Velika Gorica and Zaprešić, “always“ attend meetings which shows their desire to participate in decisions about their buildings. Most residents believe they participate “enough“ or “a lot“ in decisions about their buildings, except in Samobor where there are lots of private houses. There might be some other reasons worth studying here (we mean primarily inactivity of residents, characteristic for transition societies and Croatian society as well).

The level of personal engagement in decisions about the neighbourhood, in comparison with individual buildings, is rather low in all towns (people mostly believe there is “no participation“ in these decisions). This also corresponds with answers we received from people about local community initiatives regarding matters of their neighbourhoods. Most people believe there are not enough such initiatives.

It is people’s unconditioned right to be part of every decision which regards their housing and this right does not depend on any system’s specificities (UN, 2012, UN, 2013, In: Rolnik, 2014). The central problem of inhabitants who live in areas affected by urban renewal and revitalization (or areas intended for further construction) is very limited participation in debates and decisions concerning their housing environment (Darcy and Rogers, 2014). This research points to these problems and to the fact that negative transition circumstances have, to a large extent, excluded citizens from decision-making processes about space.

Local initiatives in Samobor and other towns might be connected with the impossibility to decide about their neighbourhoods, so people take matters into their own hands. These are primarily reactions to traffic

problems, such as asphalt paving, public lighting, building of sidewalks or new facilities, e.g kindergartens and schools. The inevitable conclusion is that such initiatives are necessary to improve the insufficient existing infrastructure (low primary neighbourhood infrastructure index and secondary neighbourhood index).

Respondents' perception of how towns care about infrastructure varies from one town to another, the reason probably being various levels of satisfaction with town authorities and mayors. In Zaprešić, people's perception is positive because most residents think the town takes "good" or "very good" care of its infrastructure.

Finally, it is important to mention high levels of satisfaction with social relations in the neighbourhood in all towns. Social relations are a relevant parameter in the quality of life studies and can contribute considerably to someone's dis/satisfaction with their neighbourhood.

5. Suggestions for neighbourhood improvement

Although the "right to the city" (and the right to housing) is mostly in hands of private or quasi-private interests today, Sassen (2004) points out that nowadays towns are also places for different participatory processes. The present-day situation does not create only new structures of power but also opens active "rhetorical" possibilities for new types of social actors that have been concealed, invisible or without vote until now. "Globalization becoming local creates objective conditions for their engagement. Think of examples such as fighting against gentrification, demonstrations against police brutality etc." (Sassen, 2004:653-654). Gentrification, generally, means restructuring of social classes and actors in urban space, it shows how after urban renewal higher (elite) classes move to city centres (Svirčić Gotovac, 2009:43)¹⁴.

¹⁴ According to Svirčić Gotovac (2010:201), in the post-socialist period, after 1991, gentrification was not the same in transition countries and Western Europe and the USA. In transition countries, a large number of projects was given to private investors which frequently resulted in non-transparent and manipulative activities, e.g. misappropriation and usurpation of public space. It happened primarily because of insufficient involvement of public institutions in urban transformations.

It would be possible and desirable to introduce regulatory measures which, in the past, successfully protected low income households from market forces. These measures could present key points of alternative housing policies, characterized by more equality (Rolnik, 2014).

For such measures to come to life in Croatia and Zagreb and for the “concealed” actors (citizens) to start acting, it is vital to include citizens in decisions about the design and development of their own neighbourhoods. “The right to the city does not exist without the right to housing; the right to housing can only be exercised through concrete activities of citizens/residents in their neighbourhoods, although such activities and participation in making decisions may seem like hardly attainable goals (AlKhalili et al., 2014:9).

Table 2 shows some suggestions our respondents mentioned which could improve their neighbourhoods.

Table 2.
Suggestions for neighbourhood improvement

Zagreb	Zaprešić	Samobor	Velika Gorica
-better traffic connections in the city -more sidewalks -more green areas (parks)	-more facilities for children and the elderly (parks, green areas, kindergartens) -more cultural events -improvement and upgrading of primary infrastructure (public lightning, benches in parks, parking lots)	-more green areas in the town -complete the estates’ infrastructure (unfinished roads and sidewalks) -better public lightning -better quality and organization of traffic (too many traffic accidents) -more stores	-road renovation -more parks -more parking spaces -more green areas -more sidewalks

We can see that suggestions are quite similar in all four town. Also, suggestions correspond with local community initiatives that citizens organize in their neighbourhoods. Mostly people mention more green areas and maintenance and upgrading of the existing infrastructure. This is particularly urgent in Samobor where unfinished roads and sidewalks

cause traffic accidents. People in Zagreb and Velika Gorica also want more sidewalks, as well as better traffic organization and road renovation. Traffic infrastructure and green areas seem to be problems present in the same proportion in all towns surveyed. After that follow suggestions about more shops and cultural events.

In Croatia and many other countries housing policies are directed at *urban sprawl*, new developments built on the edge of towns. Urban sprawl is not advantageous for towns; instead of expanding on the outskirts, towns should be given an “inside” look and the existing urban fabric should be transformed (de Matteis, 2011). A lot of towns are already working on a relatively new “**compact town**” model which seems to be the only long-term sustainable planning strategy which can save the outskirts from becoming *lost spaces*. In Zagreb, since the 1990s, we have witnessed the phenomenon of shrinking space and, in some cases, disappearance of public space, which has become *lost space* (Svirčić Gotovac and Zlatar, 2013). In the city centre and on the periphery excessive building does not fit in the existing urban structure nor does it meet citizens’ needs. The “use value” of public space is not being increased because construction work is random and unplanned, favouring narrow economic interests, not those of citizens. “Useful facilities (schools, kindergartens, sport centers, parks) are not built and the existing ones are stretched beyond capacity. Such inadequate use of space speaks at the same time of wasted space and absence of better city management strategies and policies, regarding both residential and commercial projects” (Svirčić Gotovac and Zlatar, 2013:404).

In the “compact town” model we mentioned before, both the city government and the market should focus on the transformation of the existing housing estate stock and not on the (usually unplanned) expansion (de Matteis, 2011). Intelligent transformation strategies for run-down or unfinished estates can trigger off various initiatives and improve the quality of living and housing. There is a big imbalance of power between private investors who lobby for their interests and other actors, which results, among other things, in chaotic urban sprawl. If all actors are included in planning and decision-making, wrong decisions will be avoided and the quality of housing will improve (Vujošević, 2006; Zlatar, 2013; Svirčić Gotovac and Zlatar, 2013).

6. Conclusion

A disturbed balance of power among various actors, such as we witness in Croatia, affects the quality of living and housing. Urban planning is, in large part or almost completely, influenced by **private interests** and **market laws** (economic actors) while residents themselves do not have the right to make decisions. The consequence of such approach is random, unplanned building which does not increase the use value of new developments.

On the real estate market in Zagreb great emphasis is put on new estates but they have, according to objective indicators of the quality of living, insufficient infrastructure. The focus should therefore move towards **rehabilitation and reconstruction of these, existing estates** which is not in the best interest of the market but is nevertheless the direction in which many towns move in order to improve the total quality of housing.

When we speak about the quality of living and housing, it is worth bearing in mind that **subjective and objective aspects** are intertwined with each other in such a way that a single negative aspect can immediately reduce the quality of life for residents, although other measured parameters may be very good. If a housing estate is, for instance, situated in proximity to railways, no matter how aesthetically pleasing it may be, the residents will rank it lower because of the noise. Equally, good social relations, cleanliness or general appearance of the neighbourhood can be a decisive factor for satisfaction with the neighbourhood and the quality of living.

These examples are supported by our research findings: residents are quite satisfied at the subjective level with some aspects of the quality of living we examined (which confirms, up to a point, our hypothesis about satisfaction of residents in new estates), although some objective indicators are average or below average. They rank **aesthetic and ecological aspects of their neighbourhood** above average, although there are problems such as buildings too close to each other or roads too close to estates or water quality (worse in Zaprešić than in other towns) and the level of noise (higher in Zagreb than elsewhere).

Another important thing which bears upon dis/satisfaction with the quality of housing is the local culture, i.e. the **relativity** of what is con-

sidered quality housing. A certain type of housing may be regarded as high-quality housing in one country and low-quality housing in another. So expectations and customs of residents need to be taken into consideration when we look at their subjective judgement which is the result of various factors. Nevertheless, positive evaluation of aesthetic and ecological aspects of new estates is a sign that aesthetic standards have been respected and there is no significant water or air pollution in these estates. These are certainly recommended guidelines for the future and a good example of environmental protection. If we look at the **ecological dimension of sustainable development** through the eyes of residents, we can see a pleasant picture which corresponds with the general view of Croatia as a country not threatened by ecological problems. People are used to housing estates which are not very polluted but “ecological awareness” could be raised to a higher level.

Regarding another topic we examined, **citizen participation** or the **social dimension of sustainable development**, we can conclude that a large number of residents do not participate in decisions about their neighbourhoods and the local community activity is rather unnoticeable, which leaves the second part of our research hypothesis about citizens participating, unconfirmed. Insufficient citizen participation speaks of the impossibility on the part of citizens to propose certain projects and activities for the government to consider and, ideally, accept. Unfortunately, the existing imbalance of power among various types of actors and inadequate information/education citizens have about their rights and range of activities, blocks a lot of civic initiatives. This explains weak or non-existent citizen participation in the estates we surveyed. However, in some towns, people attend tenant meetings and the local community activity is noticeable. But, according to the ladder of citizen participation, these are only bottom rungs of the ladder - non-participation (manipulation) or just informing the citizens (one-way communication). All research points out that participation, i.e. social organization is a key element of the quality of housing; therefore, citizen education about how much they can decide in their communities and neighbourhoods is crucial. Non-government organizations and professional associations play an equally important role in the improvement of life quality in every local community.

Our research shows that residents' satisfaction with different aspects of living and housing varies from one town to another. But, generally speaking, residents of Zaprešić are more satisfied with aesthetic aspects of their town and citizen participation than residents of other towns, while people in Samobor are more satisfied than the others with ecological aspects of their housing. These findings can offer some guidelines for future infrastructure plans in the existing housing estates but also for general strategies and urban housing policies. Also, further qualitative research is necessary in order to explain and clarify some discordant opinions and obtain a more detailed analysis of residents' dis/satisfaction with the quality of housing.

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Subjektivna razina kvalitete stanovanja: estetski, ekološki aspekti susjedstva i građanska participacija

SAŽETAK Kvaliteta života, pa tako i kvaliteta stanovanja, istražuje se kroz dvije razine: objektivnu i subjektivnu. U ovom radu obrađena je subjektivna razina kvalitete stanovanja tj. rezultati o tome kako stanovnici osobno procjenjuju sljedeće elemente kvalitete stanovanja u svom susjedstvu: estetske elemente (izgled susjedstva), ekološke elemente (čistoća okoliša u susjedstvu) te građansku participaciju (sudjelovanje u planiranju i odlukama o susjedstvu). Anketni upitnik primijenjen je na ovaj dio istraživanja s pitanjima koja obuhvaćaju spomenute elemente. Rezultati istraživanja pokazali su se većim dijelom povoljnima za istraživana susjedstva prema ekološkim i estetskim aspektima. Primjećuje se i razmjerno veliko zadovoljstvo stanovnika kako izgledom susjedstva tako i njegovom čistoćom i uređenošću, dok je građanska participacija ocijenjena poprilično slabom, gotovo nepostojećom. Budući da je sudjelovanje građana u oblikovanju i organizaciji svog životnog prostora bitan element kvalitete stanovanja, upozorava se na nužnost povećanja uloge građana u planiranju i organizaciji svog susjedstva.

Ključne riječi: kvaliteta stanovanja, subjektivna razina kvalitete stanovanja, estetski aspekti susjedstva, ekološki aspekti susjedstva, građanska participacija.