

THE DESERT IS ALIVE – ENGAGEMENT IN AGING DISTRICTS OF SINGLE-FAMILY HOUSING

Four Examples from North-Rhine Westphalia

Stephan Gudewer and Yasemin Utku

In the discourse surrounding the prospects of districts of single-family housing built between the 1950s to the 1970s¹, their assumed perspectives range from dramatic vacancy scenarios all the way to successful self-regulation of the market. A uniform trend is not recognizable in one direction or in the other. It is clear, however, that not all neighborhoods from this period will be able to accomplish a problem-free change of generations and that upheavals and therefore also new challenges will present themselves in the structure and composition of the neighborhoods. At the same time, these upheavals also bring along chances that especially arise from the residents of single-family housing neighborhoods. The present article draws on this point and, by focusing on civil engagement in these areas, aims to initiate a change of perspectives and illustrate approaches to developing these aging districts into sustainable neighborhoods. This article was preceded by a study that specifically dealt with the involvement of residents in aging single-family housing districts which the authors² compiled by order of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia's initiative "StadtBauKultur NRW 2020".

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¹ For the purposes of this article, "districts of single-family housing built between the 1950s and 1970s" or "aging districts of single-family housing" are defined as connected stocks of primarily single- and two-family homes from between the 1950s to the 1970s. Generally, they can be identified as independent districts starting with a size of around 1000 residents and through their spatial separation from other urban building blocks.

² This study was carried out in cooperation with InWIS Research and Consulting, Bochum. The results are scheduled to be published in 2017 in the annals of the state initiative.

1. **A New Look at a Not-So-New Topic**

Single-family homes are still the most popular type of housing for Germans, and surveys indicate that they are the most frequently named “dream home” (Interhyp AG 2014: 6). These types of housing experienced an especially large boom alongside the growing affluence starting in the 1950s. At this time, the neighborhoods were primarily developed at the urban periphery and worked their way further and further into the surroundings. With around 15 million houses built from the 1950s to the 1970s, they comprise the majority of the entire single-family housing stock in Germany (Schulz 2014: 1).

The development of these neighborhoods was frequently accompanied by new infrastructure that met the demands of families with children, who were the most important target group at this time. Meanwhile, the children have long since moved away from home, while the homes themselves are frequently still occupied by the generation of parents who have aged alongside their real estate and often live in very large units within mostly homogenous residential areas. In other cases, new residents may have moved into the area, but often neither the real estate itself nor the neighborhoods meet the current requirements for modern living. Finding the specific meaning of this for the development of these districts is comparable to poking around in the dark, for the developments are much more diverse than the neighborhoods themselves might have one assume at first glance: the single-family home neighborhood as a “purely residential area”³ appears to be a dying model – the neighborhoods are becoming more colorful and topics that until now have not been thoroughly examined, such as gainful employment, will play in increasingly important role (Hohn/Utku 2015: 185ff) and demand new area typologies. The uncertainty in the statements on the development perspectives also reflects the state of research at present; the forecasts range from great problems in these neighborhoods over the short to medium term to mixed scenarios and all the way to successful generational changes (cf. among others Wüstenrot Stiftung 2012; Institut Urban Landscape 2014; Polivka 2016). It is also claimed that this issue will follow us for a number of years – if not generations. At the same time, the increasing number of publications on aging districts of single-family housing testifies to the importance of this topic on different levels; the spectrum reaches from articles in daily newspapers to technical publications to comprehensive research studies. Within the bandwidth of contents, one point of emphasis lies on the analysis of existing and assumed problems; however, they also increasingly reveal recommendations for action for the further development of these areas.



Fig. 1: Single-family housing districts built between the 1950s and the 1970s (Source: Yasemin Utku, 2016)

³ Cf. §3 of the Zoning Ordinance—according to the BauNVO (Zoning Ordinance), a “purely residential area” is the predominant area type within districts of single-family housing. Only in exceptional cases are uses other than residential buildings and daycare facilities allowed.

Newer approaches to the development of these neighborhoods concentrate, among others, on their integration into the overall urban fabric, the design of the residential environment and supply of homes as well as the development of new centralities with a diversity of types of infrastructure. On the other hand, the adaption of the properties themselves often did and still does have priority as a key to the modernization of these districts.

However, one opportunity in the development of districts of single-family housing that is especially worth highlighting—resident engagement—is generally short-changed in the debate: civic involvement is not infrequently the trigger for and an important driver of the design and management of the challenges of aging single-family housing neighborhoods which are facing upheaval. As a result of or in parallel with resident involvement, other actors bring themselves into the districts. This includes, for example, the extension of new residential properties by companies and charities that especially focus on the needs of older residents and make use of vacant properties or add density to the existing built stock. The development of the neighborhoods is dependent on a number of partners—and often also a high degree of endurance.

In the meantime, municipal players more strongly consider these districts to be an integrative urban building block in citywide integrated municipal planning concepts. In this case, neighborhoods of single-family housing comprise only one portion of the area under consideration and are regarded within the context of neighboring districts and their potentials for development. This perspective is sensible, for example, since integrating the neighborhood could help establish an important locational criterion owing to the accessibility of jobs. Within this context, the provision of infrastructure and amenities that meet the demands of new or aging residents within the immediate vicinity of single-family housing is very important. In addition, area-specific factors such as location or image have strong consequences on the respective market situation (Wüstenrot Stiftung 2012: 290). However, the adaptation of ways of developing single-family housing districts from other urban or regional contexts is increasingly coming to the forefront of the discussion. Here, the provision of infrastructure and amenities as well as funding programs and management models play an important role. Aging districts of single-family housing can also be examined at the regional level. One example from the recent past are the projects that have been developed since 2012 in connection with “Regionale 2016 – ZukunftsLAND” in the western Münsterland region in North-Rhine Westphalia. Apart from participation of multiple aging neighborhoods of single-family housing in the ideas competition “EUROPAN 12”, concrete projects have been and are being implemented in four districts. Here, it became clear that new forms of communication are needed to enable a cooperation built on trust between residents, property owners, planners and municipalities. Speaking at eye level and intensively working on local approaches that go above and beyond common public participation formats have proven to be promising methods that serve as a guideline for the forms of communication in the often emotionally laden processes in such neighborhoods (Führs/Niekamp/Schneider 2015: 214f.). The “HausAufgaben” (lit. “Home-Work”) series, which was developed especially for these processes, was implemented for the first time during the summer of 2015 at a vacant retail store in the neighborhood of Wulfen-Barkenbergr. This framework facilitated an open discussion on the impending structural change as well as on communal life in Barkenberg. It also helped affirm the existing qualities and characteristics of Barkenberg, explore the options for revitalizing

particular properties and work out scenarios for the future of the entire district. The dialog that was kicked off at this workshop now offers a foundation for the coming activities in the single-family housing areas in the neighborhood (Stadt Dorsten et al. 2015).

2. *People Shaping their Future*

In many cases, the impulse to further development districts of single-family housing is not instigated by the municipalities, but rather by the involvement of residents in the districts: frequently, groups of residents who have moved into a neighborhood define new demands, or the original residents react to the changes in their immediate vicinity. In this way, municipal interventions such as (planned) infrastructure closures could serve as an impulse for activating civic engagement.

The term “civic engagement” encompasses the voluntary public involvement of residents for common goals, whereby individual and financial benefit does not have a high priority and the interests of the common good are at least addressed. The term includes a great diversity of topics and fields of action, which, depending on the technical discourse, are not always perceived in the same way (Deutscher Bundestag 2002: 30-38). These topics and fields are processed by different population groups and in various organizational forms. Civic engagement is not equally distributed across the population: individuals with a higher degree of education, along with higher-income persons, are involved more often, and the middle class is especially strongly involved. The cohort between 35 and 50 years of age is consistently by far the largest group of those involved; however, the engagement of those over 65 years of age has strongly increased over the past years. For around a quarter of all participants, the topic of engagement is also related to professional qualifications (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend 2012: 71-73, 93). Local civic engagement might not form an especially significant part of the total scope of action, but it poses a significant opportunity developing the respective living environments – especially when considering demographic trends in Germany (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend 2016).

Project-oriented participation in rather informal kinds of organizations such as initiatives and networks makes up a significantly large portion of urban engagement (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend 2012: 96). Therefore, this form of participation – which is especially important for the development of single-family housing districts – is given more attention in urban than in suburban and rural contexts. In addition to this, the initiatives generally have no access to municipal or institutional representatives.



Fig.2: The “Zukunftswerkstatt” (future workshop) in Dorsten’s Marienviertel neighborhood (Source: Yasemin Utku, 2016)

Engaged citizens therefore frequently demand an expanded range of information and advisory channels from public bodies (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend 2012: 64).

Because the groups that are most strongly involved in civic engagement—namely middle-class families and, increasingly, active senior populations—are also among the most important actors in generational change in aging single-family housing neighborhoods, a greater focus should also be given to the engagement that already exists in these areas. In this case, “activating” engagement is not the most important factor, but rather the detection and accompaniment of existing approaches. For municipalities, civil engagement can lead to great opportunities: especially in those areas in which changes are becoming apparent, robust, locally supported structures can help in launching common developmental steps and creating new responsibilities. Civic engagement allows public services to be installed and established, which can ultimately also advance communal life in these districts.

Engagement typically originates within a smaller core group that defines itself using similar goals and dreams for its neighborhood. Generally, residents are know the other group members from other local networks: apart from neighborhood acquaintances, contacts are often made through memberships in local clubs, involvement in religious circles or participation in parent associations at schools or daycares. Beginning with an initial idea for a common project or commitment to the preservation of a facility, an objective first needs to be set, for which local demand must also be established. At the same time, the groups need to agree on basic framework conditions for their cooperation and on the approach to achieving their goals. In the best case, the entire process can be fundamentally supported by residents on equal footing with municipal representatives who also make use of third-party expertise during the various project phases.

3. *Many Ideas, Many Paths: Four Examples from North-Rhine Westphalia*

All four case studies that will be introduced in the following section focus on functional additions to purely residential functions in the districts or on the maintenance of infrastructure facilities. The districts under study are home to between 1,000 and 4,000 residents and have regional situations that range from rural islands to suburban metropolitan locations to locations at the outskirts that are still relatively close to the inner city. Public services play a central role in all four case studies. This manifests itself differently depending on the location of the single-family housing districts in a spatial context, the engagement of the respective groups and the constellation of actors, which also necessitates differing forms of support and help from the municipality. Furthermore, the current status of the respective project is decisive for the necessary backing by the public hand. In the following section, particular aspects of this spectrum will be considered in greater detail using the example of two districts: First, attention will be given to the model of collaboration between the municipality and a resident initiative as practiced in Dorsten. The responsible office for civic engagement and voluntary work of the City of Dorsten will also be highlighted since it represents an approach to improving the municipal backing of

the initiatives, as demanded by many engaged residents (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend 2012: 64). Second, the planned community center in Dortmund will serve as an example for dealing the issue of new options for public services in districts of single-family housing.

The four case studies illustrate the bandwidth of different constellations of parameters and approaches:

Self-Supporting Structures for Spork

With just under 1,000 residents, the rurally situated single-family housing district of Bocholt-Spork is the smallest of the case studies. The residents of the district are organized within the resident association “Spork Aktiv”, which has dedicated itself to the goal of improving the living situation in the neighborhood: starting from a complete lack of services in the neighborhood, the investment of a local family of businesspeople in the estate “Gut Heidefeld” led to the opening of a village store with an adjoining event space. At the same time, a citywide concept for local support and advisory services for seniors initiated the establishment of the association “Leben im Alter” (“living in old age”). This association works in close cooperation with the existing association structures and especially involves itself in Spork by operating a drop-in and counseling center for older residents. After these initial development steps had been initiated, difficulties in the economic viability of the village concept became apparent through its operation. The original approaches therefore needed to be adjusted: the store was transformed into a café and serves as a central meeting point for residents as well as a drop-in center for visitors. Because of the need for age-appropriate residential offerings, which had also been established with the help of the local associations, the construction of 13 corresponding dwellings by the same investor family was simultaneously initiated. This project is currently being carried out as an adaptive reuse of a former school building with a supplemental new extension. This readjustment of offerings is characteristic for the stabilization phase during which the projects need to prove themselves.



Fig. 3: Readjustment in Bocholt-Spork: the village store became a café (Source: Stephan Gudewer, 2016)

New Living in Spellen

The independent district Spellen belongs to the City of Voerde and, with 4,000 residents, is clearly larger than the other case studies. Beginning from a desire to secure the existing local infrastructure and public services as well as to facilitate the relocation of new residents, neighborhood residents stated their wish to expand the supply of construction



Fig. 4: In Voerde-Spellen, securing existing retail and infrastructure facilities has a key significance (Source: Stephan Gudewer, 2016)

lands. Therefore, in order to avoid the high costs and consumption of land linked with the designation of new construction areas, a systematic search for possible densification sites was begun in cooperation between residents and the municipality.

Various situations in the built stock were considered for densification: Large parcels presented opportunities for subdivision, whereas previously undeveloped parcels within the existing street network displayed a greater potential for related development. The same applied to vacant lands that should be developed.

An initial comprehensive survey of suitable areas determined the potential for 320 additional dwellings, which corresponds with a growth of around 13 percent. Here, various prerequisites for densification emerged: while some parcels could be made available immediately, other projects would first require the creation or amendment of a development plan. The basic requirements of planning law in regard to concrete implementation projects have been changed at numerous points; the first projects are already under construction.

A Community Center for Wichlinghofen

The neighborhood Wichlinghofen, with a population of around 2,500, is located at the south side of the Dortmund metropolitan area. In 2009, neighborhood parents' associations resisted the decision to close the local elementary school based on the fact that a number of residents had moved to the area in the previous years. Since then, the school property could be secured and the initiative has striven to develop the site into a multi-functional community center. Residential units suitable for an aging population are also planned for the site. Here, it is intended that the city will act as the project developer of the community center and operator of the school. However, the remaining operations are meant to be organized by residents and other local actors. On the other hand, the implementation and subsequent operation of the ancillary housing is to be assumed by a suitable investor. Currently, local actors are finalizing the implementation plans and preparing suitable structures for operation.

The community center model is essentially a civic center with a diverse range of services, and is generally implemented within urban contexts. This principle is now supposed to be transferred to the single-family home neighborhood of Wichlinghofen, where it will supplement the infrastructure on the site of the elementary school. Owing to the structural situation of the building, the continued operation of the school would require a comprehensive renovation of the built substance. In the course of this, the supply of spaces for various activities—including non-scholastic activities—is intended to be redesigned and

expanded. For this, a number of multifunctional spaces should be developed, which can be used for various neighborhood activities. Apart from the existing and possibly expandable ranges of childcare services, spaces for clubs and leisure groups are also planned. Furthermore, with the support of a local operator, catering facilities including an event and party room should be integrated. In order to improve the supply of services in the neighborhood, the provision of spaces for banks, barbers shops and similar services that will rotate on a daily basis is also being considered. Here, the different operators will share the rental income and, using a rotating model, will cover a broad range of supplies for residents of the single-family home neighborhood.⁴ In addition to this, the original plan also included the provision of retail spaces, which has since been abandoned for financial reasons. Instead, actors are considering installing a pick-up station for grocery orders that can be supplied by the stores in the surrounding neighborhoods.

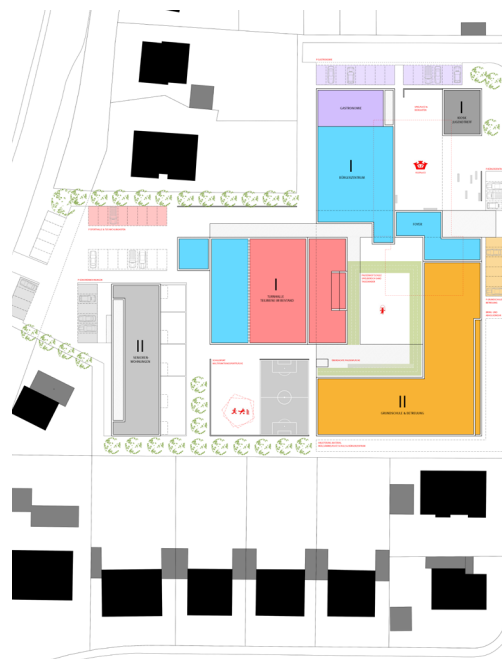


Fig. 5: Preliminary structural and functional studies for the planned community center (Source: Schamp & Schmalöier, Dortmund)

Support for this community center as the new focal point of Wichlinghofen primarily came from the new residents. All members of the core group were parents who therefore originally had connections to the elementary school, which, however, dissolved following the drawn-out process since the children now attend more advanced schools. Residents are especially well networked with other associations and institutions through the annual neighborhood festival. In the past, as part of these events, residents had been surveyed on their opinions and desires for neighborhood development. They were also presented with results and canvassed for the project. During the creation of the concept for the community center, the group was also supported by specialists within its own circle of acquaintances and was therefore able to interact with the city in a more professional manner.

Although ambiguity initially existed regarding the responsibilities and contact persons of the municipality, it is now in charge of leading the implementation of the project. In the course of this, a fixed contact person for the initiative has also been established. A feasibility study that is currently underway should help further substantiate the existing concept. In addition, the municipality is in the process of developing an integrated action plan that should enable the spatial designation of a redevelopment zone and therefore provide financial support for the implementation of the community center. The establishment of

⁴ The program “Multiplen Häuser” offers orientation regarding this idea (cf. <http://www.multiples-haus.de/>, 28.09.2016)

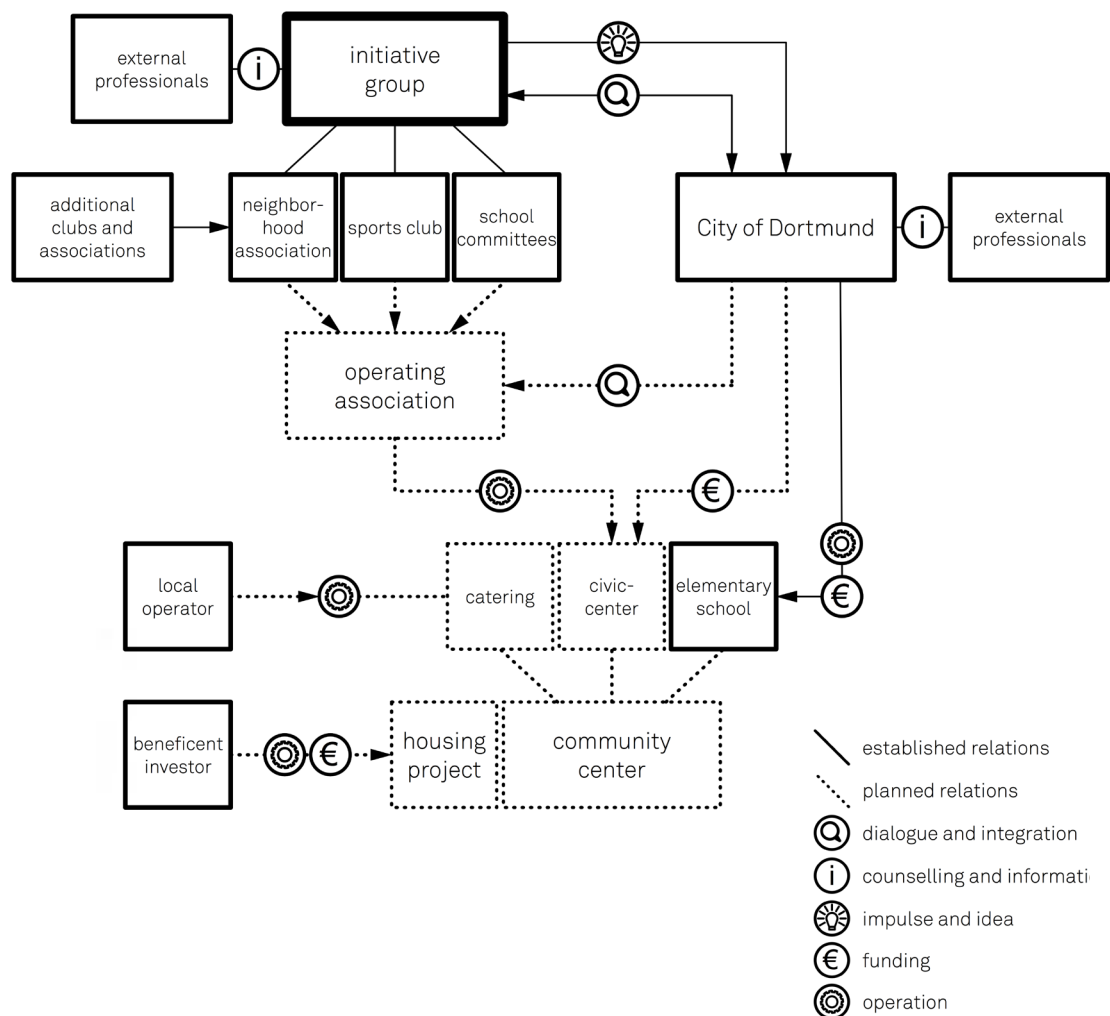


Fig. 6: Constellation of actors in Dortmund-Wichlinghofen (Source: sds_utku/Stephan Gudewer, 2016)

an association that will operate the community center and involve other local groups and associations (especially the Wichlinghofen Interest Group as the parent organization for local initiatives and associations) is also being planned. Subsequently, apart from the construction of the community center, the support of residents in the development of appropriate operating structures is envisaged. In addition to providing advice regarding suitable models, the city also intends to help moderate appropriate workshop processes.

In the process of concretizing the project, the municipality will take on the role of the project developer as well as the funding applicant and will prepare the funding prerequisites in cooperation with external specialists. At the same time, it will lend residents advisory support and help them in the development of appropriate models of management. Thanks to the operational contributions of residents, the city can expect relief in its provision of public services. At the same time, residents can expect improved services in the neighborhood across many levels.

A New Center for Marienviertel

Dorsten's Marienviertel neighborhood has around 2,300 residents and is located less than 2 km north of the center of this city at the edge of the Ruhr with a population of around 75,000. It is characterized by an increasingly aging population. Generational change is only taking place slowly, but there are hardly any age-appropriate dwellings in the neighborhood. As a reaction to a series of infrastructural closures, an initiative was created primarily to address the reuse of a centrally located school that had recently been vacated. To date, mostly longtime residents of the district are involved in the initiative. In exchange with the planning department of the City of Dorsten, and supported by the municipal Office for Civic Engagement and Voluntary Services, the group is still in an exploratory phase and is currently attempting to translate its goals into concrete projects and approaches.

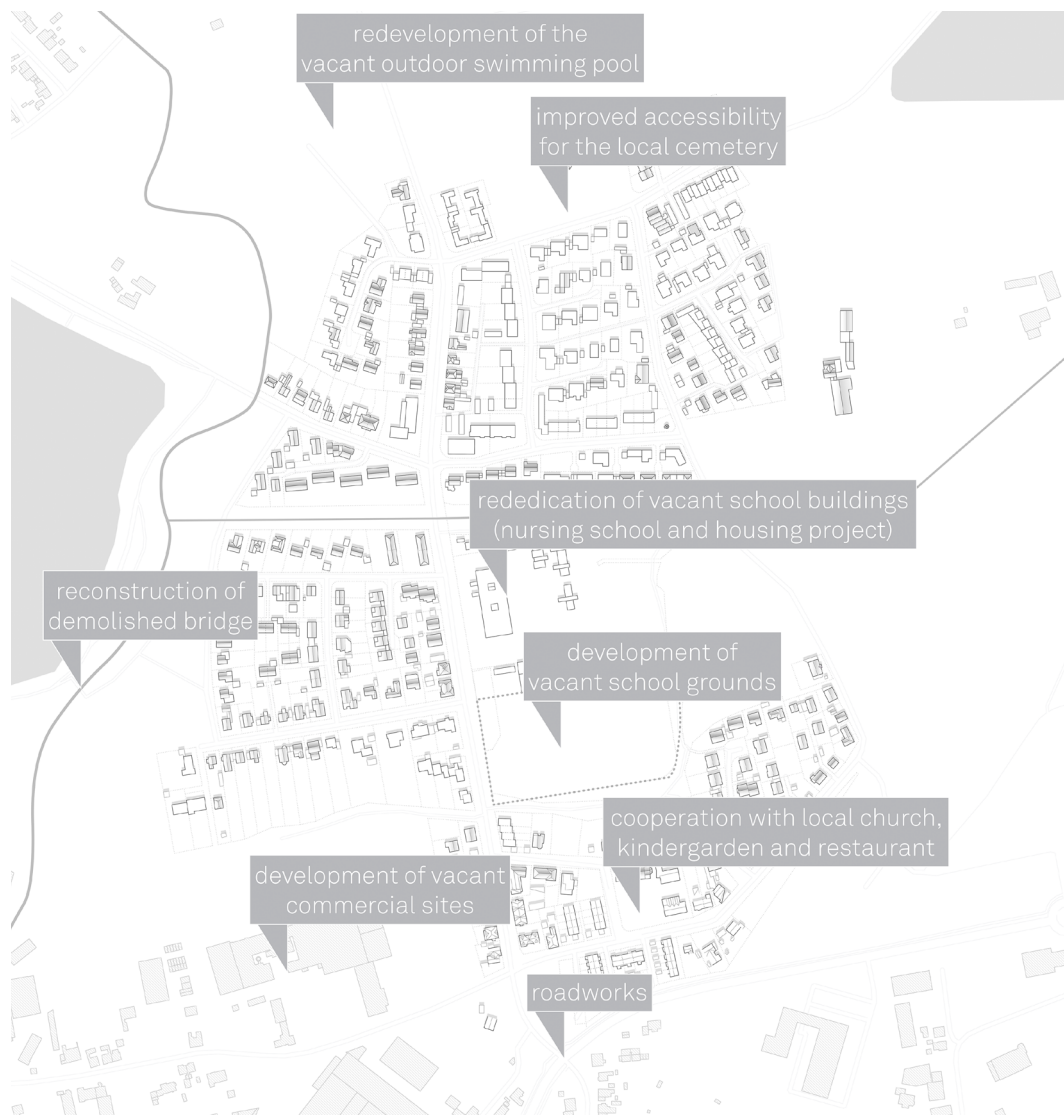


Fig. 7: Development topics and locations in Dorsten's Marienviertel
(Source: City of Dorsten, edited by Stephan Gudewer, 2016)

The “Initiative Zukunft Marienviertel” (“Initiative for the Future of Marienviertel”) was founded in 2015 by a small group of residents with strong local connections. Beginning with a desire to help steer the planned developments in the district, it follows various goals: First, it wants to work towards a comprehensive concept for the neighborhood which, apart from various local projects, also considers relationships with neighboring districts. Second, the concept strives to create a recognizable neighborhood center with an intergenerational meeting place as part of the reuse of the now-available school grounds. Additionally, the creation of new dwellings for the aging population is desired and, complementary to this, moving services should be established in order to ease relocation to this housing.

At the start of the engagement process, a residents’ assembly was organized, to which both the Mayor and the Chief Engineer of the City of Dorsten were invited. As part of the event, visitors could pose questions regarding various topics in the development of the district and could at the same time learn about the present status of the project as well as the standpoints of the municipal actors regarding the individual topics. At the same time, multiple working groups of between five and seven residents were assigned to each topic and subsequently took up ongoing work on the corresponding issues. The groups are open to all interested residents and meet at regular intervals at informal spaces in order to discuss current developments and further procedures.

The development process in Marienviertel is still starting out and the group is still at an early phase in which forms of cooperation are being tested and sensible working structures and next steps are being considered. Here, the Office for Civic Engagement and Voluntary Services is taking on an important role in the development of the group: through the preparation and moderation of multiple group-formation workshops, the working structures within the initiative could be more precisely determined. At the same time, contact to other actors in civic engagement in Dorsten and the exchange of experiences as well as networking between various groups is being promoted. The development of objectives should on the one hand be advanced by informational services and consulting with specialists, but especially as part of further workshop processes. Here, resident issues should be transformed into standards for a city-led investor competition for the development of parcels that have become available in the neighborhood.

The City of Dorsten is not just involving itself in Marienviertel as a planning body through its willingness to cooperate, but is supporting residents on other levels through the Office for Civic Engagement and Voluntary Services: here, residents can address their issues to municipal employees. Furthermore, the group from Marienviertel is being supported in defining its goals and approaches. The office is an executive department of the Mayor’s office and can thus bring suitable contacts from across the various departments into the processes.

The city offers residents of Marienviertel important backing for their on-site engagement through its open demeanor and by offering fixed contacts. This is supplemented by support for concrete activities—for example, through the moderation of workshops. In addition, the municipality offers assistance for program and project planning in the form of information and contacts and can directly involve residents in the various development steps for the district. This range of services makes the model a viable option for the accompaniment of civic engagement in districts of single-family housing and beyond.

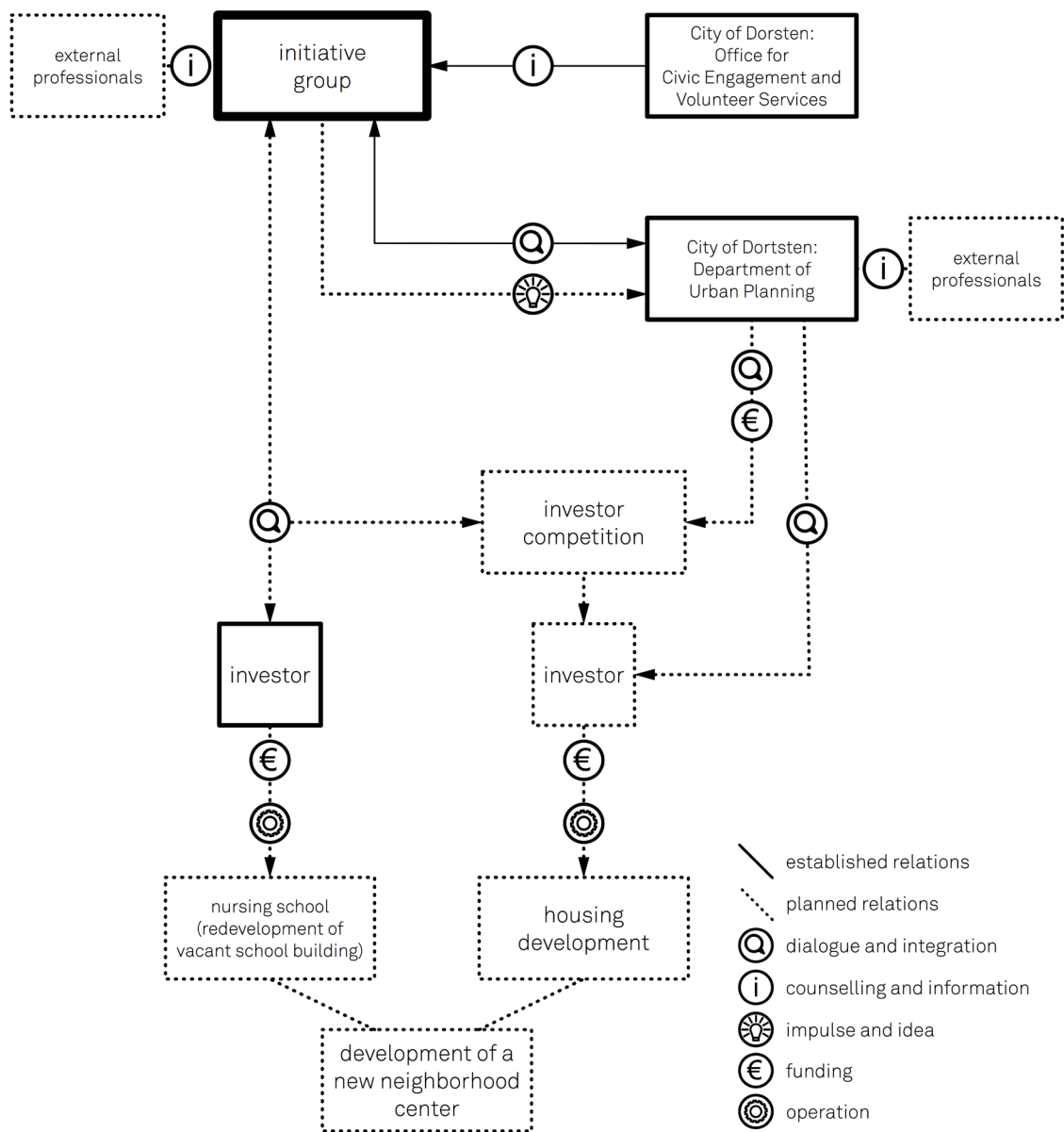


Fig.8: Constellation of actors in Dorsten's Marienviertel (Source: sds_utku/Stephan Gudewer, 2016)

4. Findings: From a District to a Neighborhood

In the course of generational change, especially those districts of single-family housing that are still stuck in the “trap of homogeneity” (Menzl 2010: 152) are faced with a comparatively high pressure to adapt. Alongside a new perspective on these districts that considers, for example, abandoned infrastructures and the corresponding availability of new vacant sites not only as a “problem” but also as a chance, new possibilities emerge for enriching districts of single-family housing with a range of services and amenities that are tailored to locally defined needs. In this way, and in accordance with the differentiated lifestyles of residents, diverse neighborhoods can emerge from once homogeneous districts. Here, approaches from other urban and programmatic contexts can be

transferred to areas of single-family housing: for example, the idea of manifold uses of spaces in “multiple houses”, which is mainly common in rural areas, or the creation of a community center as is often the case in the neighborhoods of large cities.

One requirement for a sustainable development of districts of single-family housing is the engagement and cooperation of the local population. The prerequisites for future-oriented neighborhood revitalization can only be provided when goals and authorities are established within a collaborative (and possibly also protracted) process—this applies to districts of single-family housing as well as to other urban districts. And especially these districts have strong prerequisites for civic engagement, particularly since they feature solid networks of associations and good neighborhood relations. But the development of districts of single-family housing requires many partners who can support, accompany and enrich civic engagement.

The sensitization of municipalities plays an important role on many levels: apart from a stronger awareness of pending developments in older areas of single-family housing as well as the related opportunities and risks, more attention should be paid to existing methods of civic engagement within communities. Furthermore, fixed contact persons and communication channels as well as methodological and professional competencies for group creation and project development are needed. If these conditions are met, good preconditions exist for developing neighborhoods with the aid of residents. Apart from municipal administrations and local politicians, other actors such as charities or investors that are involved in the neighborhood play an important role.

The four case studies examined here exemplify the path “from a district to a neighborhood”. On the basis of civic engagement, they have attracted new uses and functions beyond classic family living to the neighborhood. All case examples focused on complementary formats for old and new residents, but also on securing existing structures and facilities as well as on a strong community willingness to embark on new common paths of project development and implementation. The districts introduced here only offer a small glimpse into the possibilities of urban revitalization for which no specific “single-family housing programs” are necessary.

In any case, the goal should be carefully and precisely developing these neighborhoods with the greatest diversity of uses possible on the basis of civic engagement. The “desert” is indeed alive and, today and in the future, districts of single-family housing settlements will be much more than just places for living.

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