

The inhabitants' experiences as an architectural quality indicator

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Abstract

This paper proposes a reflexion on the importance of accessing the users' experience to evaluate the architectural qualities of residential buildings.

Being for a long time a major concern on the housing production, the inhabitants' needs and preferences are mostly taken in account as pre-conception data. They are integrated in the architectural design process in order to develop a more accurate spatial solution regarding the particular situation of the populations involved. Nevertheless, the way by which inhabitants interact with the specific architectural space of their houses is also an important source of new data when questioning the architectural qualities of residential buildings. Contacting, acknowledging and interpreting these extended living experiences contributes to a wider comprehension of the inhabitants' residential patterns as well as to a deeper understanding of the architectural qualities of space.

We present here a case study conducted on the residential experiences of twenty families living in a Portuguese economic housing cooperative (CHE) built in the eighties. In order to access their motivations, perceptions and experiences, we approached both the social and the architectural aspects of housing throughout a combined methodology relying on in-deep interviews as well as on graphic and photographic surveys.

This research allows the confrontation of the architectural design's initial motivations with the actual spatial experiences arising from the families' everyday practice, in order to perceive either the potentialities or the limits of the architectural device. Additionally, the research also enables a methodological reasoning concerning the instruments and the procedures of such an interdisciplinary approach.

Key words: architecture; cooperative housing; participation; everyday life