



The changing environment and neighbourhood satisfaction in socialist high-rise panel housing estates: The time-comparative perceptions of elderly residents in Prague



Jana Temelová^{a,b,*}, Alena Slezáková^a

^a Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Science, Department of Social Geography and Regional Development, Albertov 6, 128 43 Prague 2, Czech Republic

^b University of Tartu, Department of Geography, Institute for Ecology and Earth Sciences, Vanemuise 46, 51014 Tartu, Estonia

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ABSTRACT

Population aging represents a significant trend in shaping contemporary urban areas, and research investigating various aspects of age-friendly cities and neighbourhoods has enjoyed increasing attention from urban scholars and practitioners. The neighbourhood transformations that have been taking place in socialist high-rise panel housing estates in the last 20 years raise concerns as to how they are experienced by local elderly populations. Although a number of studies have addressed recent developments in high-rise panel estates in countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), little is known about the self-perceived residential quality of elderly inhabitants. This paper investigates the neighbourhood satisfaction of the elderly living in housing estates in Prague, the Czech Republic. The focus of this study is on their perceptions of the opportunities and barriers presented by the changing residential environments in relation to their daily independence. The paper takes a time-comparative approach based on face-to-face interviews with elderly adults from three different study areas. The findings suggest that neighbourhood satisfaction is influenced, among other factors, by the “life stage” of the housing estate, by the individual circumstances of moving to the neighbourhood and by the time to adapt to the new environment. Although the elderly evaluate housing estates as convenient places to live, the risks related to demographic aging and the deterioration of local facilities must be taken seriously.

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Introduction

The populations in Western cities have been aging rapidly over recent decades (see, e.g., Smith, 2009; WHO, 2007). Not only has the proportion of elderly people in the population been growing but their purchasing power and political voice have strengthened too. A clear concern for quality of life issues in contemporary Western societies takes more and more account of the lifestyles, values and needs of specific populations, including the elderly. In fact, the issues of older people are increasingly becoming a significant topic in urban research and a relevant challenge for planning and managing neighbourhoods and communities in European cities.

Research outcomes and the policy agenda support the value of aging in place, i.e., in familiar environments that support older people's independence, well-being and residential satisfaction (Gilleard, Hyde, & Higgs, 2007; Rojo Perez, Fernandez-Mayoralas,

* Corresponding author at: Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Science, Department of Social Geography and Regional Development, Albertov 6, 128 43 Prague 2, Czech Republic. Tel.: +420 221951970.

E-mail addresses: janatem@natur.cuni.cz, jana.temelova@ut.ee (J. Temelová), alena.slezakova@gmail.com (A. Slezáková).

Pozo Rivera, & Rojo Abuin, 2001; Smith, 2009; WHO, 2007). The crucial position of neighbourhood in people's quality of life, residential satisfaction, and intentions to stay or move has been widely recognized in the literature (Amérigo & Aragonés, 1997; Hur & Morrow-Jones, 2008). The neighbourhood and immediate surroundings become more important in the daily lives of elderly people as their ability and/or willingness to move decreases, their activity space shrinks and their local dependence tends to grow (Golant, 1984; Musil, 1982; Musterd & van Kempen, 2005; Rojo Perez et al., 2001; Sýkorová, 2008). It is evident that residential environment impacts older persons' quality of life and satisfaction by creating or hindering opportunities for independent, active and contented aging (e.g., Gabriel & Bowling, 2004; Phillips, Siu, Yeh, & Cheng, 2005; Smith, 2009). From this perspective, it is relevant to investigate elderly adults' perceptions of changing residential environments and circumstances of daily life in neighbourhoods that have been experiencing evident transformations during the transition from socialism to post-socialism. Although the residential satisfaction of elderly populations living in revitalizing central cities has already garnered some attention from researchers (e.g., Sýkorová, 2012; Temelová & Dvořáková, 2012; Vidovičová &

Petrová Kafková, 2012), present-day studies addressing the issue in socialist-era housing estates are missing.

Socialist high-rise panel housing estates constitute a significant housing segment in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Kovács & Herfert, 2012). In Prague, over 40% of the population lives in this type of housing (Temelová, Novák, Ouředníček & Puldová, 2011a). A discussion on the future development of housing estates and regeneration strategies aimed at making them convenient places to live naturally became very topical after the fall of socialism, and not only in the Czech Republic (e.g., Egedy, 2000; Glock & Häussermann, 2004; Kovács & Herfert, 2012; Kährlik & Tammaru, 2010; Maier, 2003; Tosics, 2004; van Kempen, Dekker, Hall, & Tosics, 2005). Housing estates originally built for families with children aged, as did the first generations of their inhabitants. The selective out-migration of younger and more educated people from these areas became evident and was one of the factors that reinforced the aging of local populations (Kährlik & Tammaru, 2010). Existing studies suggest that the elderly are more likely to stay in high-rise panel estates (Kährlik & Tammaru, 2010; Musterd & van Kempen, 2007), which is very much in accordance with a general view of older people as less mobile and less open to change (Gilleard et al., 2007; Musil, 1982). Therefore, elderly residents' appraisal of and satisfaction with the attributes of their housing estate environments are crucial issues to investigate. Although there are a number of studies addressing various aspects of social and physical transformation in high-rise panel housing estates in CEE countries, little is known about older people's experience of neighbourhood change and satisfaction in this type of urban environment (for exceptions, see Musil, Kotačka, Lérová, Librová, Macková, Procházka, & Ryšavý, 1985; Temelová, Dvořáková & Slezáková, 2010).

This article discusses the neighbourhood satisfaction¹ of older people living in socialist high-rise panel housing estates in Prague. The focus is on the elderly residents' perceptions of housing estates as residential environments where they lived and satisfied their daily needs. Three related research questions are addressed: (1) How do the elderly residents evaluate everyday facilities, public spaces, housing and social relations in housing estates? (2) As long-term residents, how do they perceive the changes in their residential environments during the transition from socialism to post-socialism? (3) How do the elderly people's perceptions and satisfaction differ between housing estates? The research takes advantage of the long-term residence of many elderly inhabitants, who are seen as the immediate witnesses to the ongoing neighbourhood changes. Interviews are used to track their perceptions and memories of the changing daily life conditions in three different generations of housing estates in Prague. The results illustrate possible impacts of post-socialist neighbourhood change on a specific population (the elderly) and offer some indications for future developments in high-rise panel housing estates.

The elderly population in housing estates

As distinctive symbols of the socialist era, high-rise panel housing estates became an object of critique and negative predictions across CEE with the change of political regimes at the beginning of the 1990s. Architects and planners in particular criticized the poor design of housing estates, the neglected technical conditions of the dwellings and the generally low physical quality of these areas (Dimitrovska Andrews, 2005; Maier, 2003; Tosics, 2004). Monofunctional high-rise housing blocks suffered from a lack of

cultivated and maintained public space (Dekker & van Kempen, 2004; Musil et al., 1985; Tosics, 2004). Despite high population densities and the original aims of the planners, the service infrastructures (i.e., daily shops and services, social and health care institutions, leisure facilities) remained underdeveloped in the majority of Czech housing estates throughout the socialist era (Maier, 2003; Musil et al., 1985). Safety and feelings of insecurity have also been reported to be a problem in many housing estates (Dekker & van Kempen, 2004; Maier, 2003). The weaknesses of large housing estates repeatedly raised concerns about the social downgrading of these areas in post-socialist cities (Kährlik & Tammaru, 2010; Temelová et al., 2011a; Kovács & Herfert, 2012). However, there are certain positive aspects of this housing form that need to be emphasized. Flats providing adequate living standards, large green spaces, and often good accessibility are among the main assets of housing estates for their residents (Barvíková, 2010; Dekker & van Kempen, 2004; Maier, 2003; Musil et al., 1985; Tosics, 2004).

The transition from a socialist to a post-socialist regime brought new opportunities as well as threats for the development of housing estates. Although there is a consensus that differentiation among housing estate districts occurs (Dekker & van Kempen, 2004; Kovács & Herfert, 2012; Kährlik & Tammaru, 2010; Maier, 2003; Musterd & van Kempen, 2007), some issues concerning their development trajectories are more or less common to all CEE countries. Temelová et al. (2011a) identified a set of three risk processes threatening the future development of housing estates in post-socialist cities, namely, physical downgrading, social degradation, and demographic aging. Regeneration programs were introduced in most of the CEE countries to avoid the further deterioration of housing estates and to assist the regeneration of local residential environments (Dimitrovska Andrews, 2005; Glock & Häussermann, 2004; Maier, 2003). Although housing estates in formerly centrally planned economies have still retained a relatively heterogeneous social composition,² concerns about their possible social decline caused by selective mobility processes have become a subject of serious academic debate (Hiefert, Neugebauer, & Smigiel, 2013; Kovács & Herfert, 2012; Kährlik & Tammaru, 2010; Maier, 2003; Tosics, 2004).

The demographic aging of housing estates' populations needs to be particularly emphasized considering the focus of this article. Designed to accommodate family households, socialist housing estates originally had largely homogeneous demographic structures dominated by young families with children (Gentile et al., 2012; Musil et al., 1985). The aging of the original populations and the increasing proportion of the elderly in panel districts are now being reported in many countries (Kährlik & Tammaru, 2010; Maier, 2003; Musterd & van Kempen, 2007). The construction period obviously influences the age structures of high-rise areas (see, e.g., Kährlik & Tammaru, 2010; Maier, 2003; Temelová et al., 2011a). The impacts of demographic aging are expected to be the most pronounced in the oldest and, today, most mature panel housing districts.

There is a body of literature that points to the negative effects of neighbourhood restructuring (mainly in central and inner cities) on the elderly population, who are confronted with marginalization, deteriorated social networks, rising housing costs, or the disappearance of daily services (e.g., Musil, 1993; Phillips et al., 2005; Phillipson, 2007). Because the aging of urban societies became a topic in CEE cities as well (Haase, Steinführer, Kabisch, Grossmann, & Hall, 2011; Steinführer & Haase, 2007), the effect of urban restructuring on elderly residents has attracted more scholarly interest. Although negative experiences can be traced among elderly

¹ The term neighbourhood satisfaction refers to people's perception and assessment of the residential environment in which they live (and its social and physical attributes) in relation to their needs and expectations (Amérgo & Aragonés, 1997; Hur et al., 2008; Permantier, Bolt, & Ham, 2011; Rojo Perez et al., 2001).

² Unlike in Western Europe, the mechanisms of housing allocation resulted in a mixed social profile of large housing estates in state-socialist countries (Temelová et al., 2011a; Gentile, Tammaru, & van Kempen, 2012; Kovács & Herfert, 2012).

inner-city dwellers (Grossmann, Haase, Steinführer, Grabkowska, and Bierzynski (2011) labeled this group as “frustrated inner-city residents”), most of the studies show relatively high residential satisfaction among older people in the central areas of post-socialist cities (Temelová et al., 2010; Sýkorová, 2012; Temelová & Dvořáková, 2012; Vidovičová & Petrová Kafková, 2012).

The risks related to demographic aging and the concentration of older residents in housing estates have been discussed particularly in relation to the deterioration of local services and a decline in investment activity (Temelová et al., 2011a). Dekker and van Kempen (2004) highlighted the lack of good shopping facilities in large housing estates in Eastern Europe. They related the problem to retail deconcentration that led to the opening of new shopping malls near the estates and the closing of other facilities within these areas. In contrast, Temelová et al. (2010) found that the local services that were originally underdeveloped in socialist panel districts were supplemented in some housing estates in Prague after the market economy was established (see also Barvíková, 2010). New stores and services emerged as newly built in-fills within estates or as reused existing buildings and panel house parterres. These two scenarios illustrate not only the differential development of housing estates in specific local contexts but also the fact that the quantity and quality of local facilities may relate to demographic aging. If local demand from an aging and shrinking population declines, it may negatively affect the provision of local services in panel housing districts (see also Glock and Häussermann (2004) for a discussion on the impacts of depopulation and vacancies in housing estates). The lower economic standing of the elderly is also seen as a risk in relation to the physical regeneration of panel houses. The limited ability of low-income households to meet their housing costs may reduce the expenditures invested in the maintenance of dwellings (Dimitrovska Andrews, 2005; Temelová et al., 2011a; Kovács & Herfert, 2012).

Research into neighbourhood satisfaction suggests that residents of high-rise panel districts generally perceive them less critically than do outsiders (e.g., Kovács & Herfert, 2012; Maier, 2003; Musil et al., 1985; Musterd & van Kempen, 2005). Comparing large housing estates across CEE urban regions, Herfert et al. (2013) revealed a high level of residential satisfaction and a low level of potential mobility. Neighbourhood satisfaction among older people is further boosted by their long-term residence and the development of stronger emotional attachments to a place over time (Golant, 1984; Musil, 1982; Rojo Perez et al., 2001; Sýkorová, 2012). Musterd and van Kempen (2005) confirm that elderly residents tend to be more positive about their neighbourhood than do other age groups, and this also applies in the case of large housing estates. Comparing various residential environments, Föbker and Grotz (2006) showed that the elderly living in housing estates reported higher levels of contentment regarding shopping facilities and greenery but also lower feelings of safety compared with other urban areas (central cities, suburbs, urbanized former villages). There is, however, little in-depth research into the neighbourhood satisfaction of elderly people living in (post-)socialist high-rise panel housing estates. One of the largest studies of people's (including the elderly) daily experiences living in this type of environment was conducted by Musil et al. (1985) in several Czech cities in the 1980s. They found that older adults' satisfaction in housing estates was fairly low after they relocated from other neighbourhoods, particularly because their emotional and social ties in their previous locations had been severed, and they were not accustomed to the new modern environments, had to commute longer distances, and felt the lack of everyday facilities and the poor maintenance of greenery and public space (Musil et al., 1985). However, enhanced housing standards clearly helped elderly people adapt to their new environments (Musil et al., 1985). More recent studies indicate a shift in elderly residents'

perceptions of their residential environments and daily life conditions in socialist high-rise estates. Temelová et al., 2010 showed that retail and services facilities, greenery and public transportation were generally highly valued by the senior population living in Prague's largest housing estate. In contrast, Dekker and van Kempen (2004) suggested that contemporary social change and population turnover in high-rise panel areas could disturb the feeling of social cohesion and increase sentiment about the past among long-term, now-elderly residents. Existing studies from Prague's housing estates indicate a similar trend; fluctuation of residents is reflected in less-neighborly relationships and the growing uncertainty of elderly people about local social support (Barvíková, 2010; Temelová et al., 2010). Some studies have warned that the elderly population is at risk of being trapped in the worsening physical and social environments of housing estates (Kovács & Herfert, 2012; Musterd & van Kempen, 2007).

Post-socialist development brought new problems as well as opportunities for residents of high-rise panel housing districts in many areas of their daily lives. The elderly population is considered particularly sensitive to ongoing neighbourhood changes. An overview of the literature suggests that the impact of changing environments on the neighbourhood satisfaction of older people living in socialist high-rise housing estates is still understudied and ambiguous. What is known, however, indicates that the experiences of neighbourhood change among elderly residents vary and are clearly embedded in and dependent on the local context.

Case study areas

Three case study areas (Invalidovna, Háje, Nové Butovice) were selected for an empirical study of elderly residents' satisfaction in Prague's housing estates. They vary in their periods of construction, sizes, and locations within the city (see Fig. 1 and Table 1). Despite their out-of-the-city-center locations, all of the housing estates enjoy very good accessibility by public transportation.

Invalidovna is a small housing estate located in the inner city and was one of the first panel estates built in Prague, as early as the 1960s. It was planned as an experimental self-sufficient neighbourhood, unlike the two other case study areas, which are among the large high-rise complexes later constructed on the southern and southwestern outskirts of Prague. The Háje housing estate is a product of a massive panel housing construction boom in the outer city during the 1970s. It is the oldest part of Jižní Město (South Town), the largest housing estate in the Czech Republic.

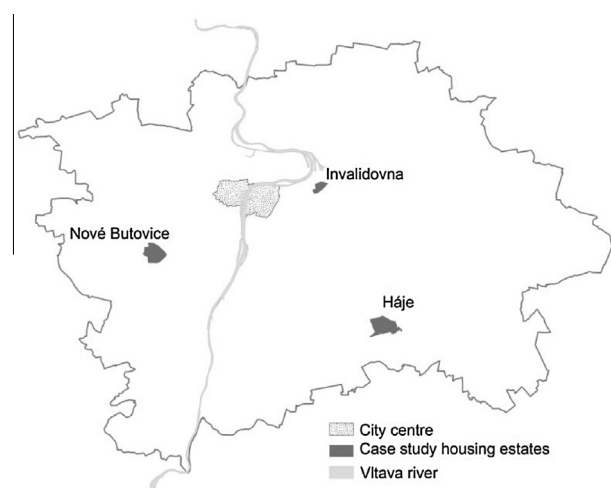


Fig. 1. The location of the case study housing estates within Prague. Background map: ArcCR 500.

Table 1
The basic characteristics of the case study areas.

| | Invalidovna | Háje | Nové Butovice |
|------------------------------|-------------|------------|---------------|
| Location | Inner city | Outer city | Outer city |
| Period of construction | 1960s | 1970s | 1980s |
| Population size ^a | 2513 | 15,686 | 11,409 |
| Population 65+ ^a | 24% | 11% | 6% |
| Old-age index ^b | 198 | 112 | 27 |

Source: Czech statistical office, Census 2001.

^a The data on population size and age structure of the selected case study areas are only available from the 2001 census.

^b Old-age index shows the ratio of population over 65 years old to 100 children aged 0–14. In 2001 the proportion of the population aged 65+ in the whole of Prague was 16% and the old-age index was 122.

Built at the end of the 1980s, Nové Butovice is one of the most recent housing estates in Prague. It is a part of South-West Town, where panel-built construction continued until the beginning of the 1990s. Several new, non-panel apartment buildings also emerged in the area after 2000. Compared with Invalidovna, Nové Butovice and Háje have much higher population densities.

Because of the various construction periods, the process of demographic aging is at different stages, and the contemporary age composition of their populations differs between the three housing estates. Whereas the elderly make up almost one-fourth of the population of Invalidovna and are at twice the level of the child population there, the more recently constructed Nové Butovice has a very young age structure and is in fact one of the youngest districts in Prague (see Table 1). The process of demographic aging has presumably been continuing in Háje and Nové Butovice as the generations of the first inhabitants (families with small children) have reached adult and elderly ages. The shrinking original population in Invalidovna is, in contrast, expected to be replaced by younger migrants who may rejuvenate the aging composition of the area. Age composition is also reflected in the educational status of local populations; the share of the university educated is higher in the youngest estate, Nové Butovice, compared with the other two areas (ČSÚ, 2001). All three housing estates, however, belong to established residential areas of Prague and do not show any signs of social degradation (Temelová et al., 2011a; Špaček, 2012a, 2012b).

Method and data collection

The qualitative data on elderly neighbourhood satisfaction in this study were gathered from face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Based on our experience from previous studies on the topic (see Temelová et al., 2010; Temelová & Dvořáková, 2012), face-to-face interviewing rather than questionnaire design was deemed to be more suited to the subject matter and the target group. Respondents were given the freedom to express feelings, opinions and memories, and this and the interviewer's flexibility of inquiring were among the main benefits of the selected data-gathering technique.

The sample was intentionally designed to understand the perceptions of a specific group: elderly residents who actively use and experience their residential environments while satisfying their daily needs. For that purpose, our respondents were (1) recruited from the population older than 65 years living in the selected case study areas and (2) approached by the interviewer directly on the streets of these areas. Every passing person who could potentially fall into the target group was asked an initial question on age and place of residence to select the group for the subsequent in-depth interviews. In line with the research focus, this purposeful sampling intentionally omitted those elderly

people who did not use the neighbourhood space while collecting information-rich cases from among those active neighbourhood users who experienced the changing opportunities and barriers of the particular residential environment on a daily basis (see also Temelová & Dvořáková, 2012; Vidovičová & Petrová Kafková, 2012). Generally, research findings suggest that if daily infrastructure is available in the elderly's living environments, they tend to be active neighbourhood users³ (Föbker & Grotz, 2006; Dvořáková & Temelová, 2012). Regarding the focus of this paper – the perception and evaluation of neighbourhood change – gathering responses from neighbourhood non-users was not considered informative. Obviously, the results of the study are then relevant only for active neighbourhood users, the independent elderly. They cannot be applied to non-users (1) who, although active, for various reasons satisfy their daily needs elsewhere or (2) who do not leave their apartments or buildings. Physical or mental restrictions mean that they likely face mobility barriers even inside their flats and houses. Their inability to independently satisfy their daily needs and their reliance on outside assistance is related to individual health constraints rather than to (changing) residential environments (for discussion on the influences of health limitations and physical environment on activities of seniors, see Vidovičová & Petrová Kafková, 2012).

The data gathering was conducted at different times of day during May and June 2011. The outline of interviews focused on exploring the elderly people's satisfaction with the various social and physical attributes of their neighbourhoods, including daily shopping and services, transportation, public greenery and safety, social relations and housing.⁴ These subjects are reported to count among the crucial quality-of-life and satisfaction determinants relating to neighbourhoods where older adults live (see, e.g., Gabriel & Bowling, 2004; Musil, 1982; Rojo Perez et al., 2001; Temelová & Dvořáková, 2012).

The inquiry into the perceptions of the elderly was followed by questions about the past to collect memories and to confront their views on life in the study areas at the time of the survey and in the past.⁵ Additional questions beyond the basic interview outline were asked in response to each respondent's answers. Each interview was recorded and afterwards transcribed. The collected data were coded, categorized, and compared to identify, conceptualize, and explain the core issues relevant to the research topic (see, e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The data analysis sought not only to understand the elderly people's satisfaction with their neighbourhood, but also to reveal differences among the studied housing estates. Selected literary narratives are used in the results section to illustrate some typical feelings and memories of the respondents.

The interviews were conducted with a total of 45 individuals aged over 65 years (15 in each case study area). Despite the limited number of respondents, the research appeared saturated; the statements eventually tended to repeat and did not provide any additional information. The age composition of the interviewees reflects the “maturing stage” of housing estates and their true population structures, and thus, the respondents in Invalidovna were older than those in Háje and much older than those in Nové Buto-

³ Föbker and Grotz (2006) found in housing estate in Bonn that 92% of elderly dwellers do their daily shopping within their own neighbourhood.

⁴ The interviews further tackled the issue of leisure and cultural facilities; however, the research showed a rather low level of interest of the elderly in this kind of organized activities. They preferred to spend their free time with families and grandchildren, walking the dogs or traveling outside Prague to their cottages. Therefore the results are not reported in this study.

⁵ The authors are aware of the possible influence of recall biases (i.e. the effect of a respondent's memory, manipulation of personal history) in respondents' answers. The purpose of the interviews was not to reconstruct the real situation existing in housing estates in the past, but rather to discuss a retrospective evaluation of change in the studied neighbourhoods from the point of view of elderly residents.

vice. The household composition of the respondents also differed in the studied areas; over half of the respondents lived in one-person households in Invalidovna and Háje, whereas in Nové Butovice, two-thirds lived as couples. A vast majority of the elderly interviewees were long-term residents of the areas. Most of the research participants in all of the case study areas were female.⁶ There are several reasons for this: (1) there is a significant female overrepresentation in the elderly population in Prague,⁷ In a research focused on activities of elderly living in central parts of large Czech cities Vidovičová and Petrová Kafková (2012) showed that 44% of women, but only 32% of men move dominantly within their neighbourhood and (2) women are recognized as more active neighbourhood users (Vidovičová & Petrová Kafková, 2012).⁸ Although this research drew on qualitative methodology, the street sampling of respondents was as random as possible (e.g., various places and times for contact initiation). This leads us to believe that our research informants were reasonably representative of the population of active, elderly, daily neighbourhood users in housing estates. Because a preliminary analysis did not show any substantial differences between male and female statements, no additional male respondents were approached. Existing research supports this assumption: Vidovičová and Petrová Kafková (2012) found that the residential satisfaction of elderly people in central cities is not influenced by gender, and Sýkorová (2012) does not refer to a gender dimension when analyzing older adults' experiences with inner-city restructuring. In the following results section, we refer to a general term, "elderly," when introducing the perceptions of active, elderly, daily neighbourhood users.

Results: Elderly residents' neighbourhood satisfaction and perceptions of the changing environments in housing estates

The empirical part of the study presents the results of qualitative research into elderly residents' neighbourhood satisfaction in three different generations of housing estates in Prague. Attention is paid to their perceptions of how the environments and conditions of daily life had changed in their places of long-term residence. Neighbourhood satisfaction and changes are assessed in the areas of daily retail and service facilities, transportation, public green space, safety, social relations and housing, which are seen as crucial quality-of-life and satisfaction determinants related to neighbourhoods where people live.

Overall, most of the interviewees felt satisfied in the neighbourhood where they lived. This is in line with studies carried out in other city neighbourhoods of Prague (e.g., central city: see Temelová & Dvořáková, 2012) and confirms that the elderly are fairly satisfied with the places where they live and they manage to carry out the everyday activities of living despite the evident changes in their residential environments that have taken place under the conditions of the market economy. The findings thus offer further empirical evidence that calls into question the social exclusion of the elderly in CEE city neighbourhoods that had been often taken for granted in the debate on the consequences of the post-socialist urban transition.

The comparative study of the three housing estates further showed that the satisfaction of the residents interviewed appeared to be higher in Háje and Invalidovna than in Nové Butovice. For all of the housing estates, the accessibility of green space was the factor that contributed most to elderly residents' satisfaction with their places of residence. The other aspects varied between the

studied areas – in Invalidovna, it was vicinity to the city center; in Háje, it was the accessibility of daily facilities; and in Nové Butovice, it was good public transportation. The following paragraphs shed more light on elderly residents' satisfaction with various attributes of daily life as well as on the differences between the studied housing estates.

Public transport and daily facilities

One of the positive aspects of many of Prague's housing estates is their public transportation access. In addition to buses (and trams in Invalidovna), all three of the estates studied are well served by underground lines. The elderly people interviewed praised the quality of public transportation in all of the studied areas, although this has not always been the case in the past. For example, the early inhabitants of Háje struggled to reach work, schools, and services by public transportation before the underground line was opened.

The satisfaction of elderly residents with basic daily shops and services (grocery and drug store, post office, pharmacy, general practitioner) differed between the three studied housing estates. Whereas those living in the two newer estates (Háje and Nové Butovice) were fairly satisfied with the provision of all basic facilities in their neighbourhoods, residents of earlier-built Invalidovna largely criticized the accessibility and quality of local services. To understand the contemporary differences, historical trajectories of the studied areas and their perceptions by elderly inhabitants need to be considered.

The Háje housing estate was constructed during the 1970s, at a time when large, standardized estates were being built. At a time of housing shortages, the number of new flats was maximized at the expense of developing local facilities (Bartoň & Augusta, 1998). The provision of everyday shops and services was literally tragic in the early history of the Háje housing estate, and the situation did not improve meaningfully during the entire socialist period. In addition, the first inhabitants of Háje had to work around many other difficulties related to living in an unfinished estate, including missing roads and sidewalks, insufficient electricity, and water supplies or incomplete phone lines (Bartoň & Augusta, 1998). A very similar situation was found on the Nové Butovice housing estate, which was mostly constructed at the end of the 1980s but not finished until the beginning of the 1990s (Broncová, 2006).

A woman who arrived in Háje in 1976 thinks back to those days: "There was only this one panel house; I was actually the second tenant there. Everything was under construction, with just building, mud, and rubble everywhere; it was simply a construction site. There was absolutely nothing here in those days. We had to travel to Petrovice (10 min by bus, the authors), or bring everything from Prague (the city center, the authors)." (HA8, 72 years).⁹

Despite a desperate situation at the beginning of its history and the under-provision of shops and services experienced by residents throughout most of the socialist era, the supply of local services improved markedly with the change of political regime after 1989. Retail chains expanded into many housing estates during the 1990s to capitalize on the enormous concentrations of local customers. Today, people have the choice of several facilities located in Háje and Nové Butovice, and the elderly residents interviewed appreciated this greatly.

A long-term resident commented on the changes in grocery infrastructure and the expansion of retail chains after the

⁶ Three quarters of respondents in investigated housing estates were elderly women.

⁷ In Prague, women represent 60% of population older than 65 years (ČSÚ, 2011).

⁸ In a research focused on activities of elderly living in central parts of large Czech cities Vidovičová and Petrová Kafková (2012) showed that 44% of women, but only 32% of men move dominantly within their neighbourhood.

⁹ The citations to interviews use the abbreviation of housing estate (HA = Háje, NB = Nové Butovice, IN = Invalidovna) and an interview number. The age of the respondent is indicated in brackets.



Fig. 2. Newly built supermarket in Háje versus closed local service in a housing parterre in Invalidovna. Photo: authors.

collapse of socialism: “Then, everything arrived here. Now, we have *TESCO* here; that’s where I do my basic shopping. Also *LIDL* is here...well, *LIDL* provides an excellent service for us [...] And *PENNY* came here too, so we have enough shops now. It is much better today than it used to be.” (HA8, 72 years).

Compared with Háje and Nové Butovice, our research indicated quite an opposite trend in the oldest housing estate, Invalidovna (built in the 1960s). The elderly inhabitants there complained a great deal about the accessibility and quality of local facilities.¹⁰ Long-term residents contrasted the unsatisfactory situation with times past, when several smaller specialized stores and services were located on the housing estate (see Fig. 2).

Memories of an elderly person who had lived in Invalidovna for almost 50 years showed the changes clearly: “Well, it’s worse now of course. For instance, we don’t have a library here anymore, only a mobile bus library, but a person of my age can hardly climb up there. We used to have a post office here, it is very important for us, dry cleaners, laundry [...] and stores used to be here [...] and there used to be a restaurant here, even a summer restaurant.” (IN11, 78 years).

Although the various small stores that were previously located in Invalidovna were replaced with a larger supermarket, the majority of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the prices, selection, quality and freshness of goods, and long queues at the cashiers. Except for the grocery store and a well-regarded general practitioner, other daily facilities (drug store, pharmacy, post office) are missing in Invalidovna and, according to the respondents, are also not easily accessible in the near surroundings. Although younger people might not see this as a problem, the elderly, particularly those with mobility restrictions, perceived it as a constraint that reduced their independence and increased their reliance on outside help.

A woman walking on crutches described how she had solved the problem of the remotely located post office: “It is too far for old people; it used to be better when it was here. So when my pension payday came, I called the post office and they sent me a form, I filled it in and now a post woman delivers me my pension.” (IN1, 77 years).

The case of Invalidovna offers important evidence on the potential negative effects of demographic aging in housing estates. In the search for an explanation for the declining local service infrastructure and elderly residents’ growing dissatisfaction, at least three

factors need to be considered: (1) population size and density are much lower in Invalidovna compared with Háje and Nové Butovice; (2) the process of demographic aging has progressed markedly in the oldest housing estate, and the purchasing power of the predominantly elderly (pensioner) population is lower compared with the other two, newer housing estates; and (3) unlike Háje and Nové Butovice, Invalidovna was designed and built as a compact, fully equipped housing estate containing residential buildings, retail and civic facilities, and public space (Broncová, 2008). Whereas the first two factors suggest that the area is less interesting (potentially profitable) for commercial enterprises and also less efficient in terms of public services provision, the third indicates that the expectations of long-term inhabitants for their residential environment might have been higher in Invalidovna. This was also apparent in the shared nostalgia of Invalidovna residents about the past as contrasted with the bitter memories of the never-completed environments in Háje and Nové Butovice.

Public greenery and safety

One of the assets generally appreciated among housing estate residents is access to natural and green areas (Dekker & van Kempen, 2004; Tosics, 2004). The satisfaction of elderly residents with public green spaces was very high in all of the studied high-rise neighbourhoods in Prague. Háje and Nové Butovice are located in the outer city and offer large green areas suitable for recreation. The interviewees were also positive about the public and green spaces in between the residential blocks (extent, maintenance, provision of benches). Comparing the present situation with the socialist past, the elderly clearly perceived an upward trend (compare with Musil et al., 1985). However, they often complained about vandalism, damaged public spaces and the concentrations of homeless people and “strange individuals” in these places. A generational conflict in the view of how public space should be used also seems to play a role here.

“The problem is that youngsters gather here and make noise and also homeless people hang around—it’s bad,” complained one resident (HA8, 72 years).

These negative phenomena also affected perceptions of safety in the studied neighbourhoods. The elderly in all housing estates commented, regardless of their perceptions of local safety, that they preferred to not leave their flats after dark. Lack of safety was also recognized as a barrier to the elderly’s outside activities in central cities (Vidovičová & Petrová Kafková, 2012). They related their fear to homeless people and “strange individuals” who gathered in public spaces around underground stations and near 24-h bars and supermarkets (where they could get cheap alcohol). Some respondents related their fear of crime to flat and car robberies, and a few respondents described their own negative experiences.

¹⁰ It is likely that also some elderly inhabitants of the larger estates of Háje and Nové Butovice find the accessibility of daily facilities inconvenient, particularly those who live in more peripheral parts of housing estates. However, our research focused on active users of neighbourhood space, so the unsatisfied residents who do not use the local services (for various reasons) might have remained hidden.

Local social relations

One of the most noticeable social features depicted by the elderly people interviewed was a change in the local populations in high-rise neighbourhoods. This was particularly evident in the two residentially older estates, Invalidovna and Háje. The respondents related population turnover to a deterioration of social relations, which they believed were closer in the past. The retrospective evaluation of social relations by the elderly seemed to be influenced by a certain nostalgia for their youth and by the specific demographic compositions of the households that had moved to the housing estates during socialism. At the time when the panel estates were built, it was predominantly young families with children, prioritized by socialist housing policy (Gentile et al., 2012), who became the new inhabitants. Similar life situations and sharing the same practical problems of living in a new environment seemed to unite them. An analogous situation was recently documented in the case of the new suburban communities developing around Prague (Špačková & Ouředníček, 2012). As the first generations of residents grew older, some of them sold their flats and moved away, and some died and were replaced by new inhabitants. Those who have stayed in the housing estates until today understandably do not keep in touch with the newcomers as closely as they once did with their same-age peers, with whom they shared decades in one house or neighbourhood.

The elderly people living in all of the studied areas had identical assumptions that high resident turnover, an increase in temporary residents, and an influx of foreigners (Vietnamese in all housing estates, Ukrainians in Invalidovna, Russians in Nové Butovice) complicated establishing new social contacts (a similar situation was found also in Prague's inner city: see Sýkorová, 2012; Temelová & Dvořáková, 2012). Many of the new tenants are temporary renters, and the respondents believed their temporary status was the main reason they were not motivated to establish closer social relations.

"We say hello to each other, even the new ones do, but I tell you that it is becoming a lodging house here [...] it's because the heirs of the original owners passed it onto their children, who already lived somewhere else, so they rented it out. We have, for instance, Chinese here, or some Ukrainians, but we don't know each other and it's quite a problem." (IN11, 78 years).

At the same time, however, the elderly from all of the studied areas were fairly positive about social support and emergency assistance from their neighbors. Most knew someone in the estate whom they could ask for help in case of need, not only among the long-term residents but often also among the newcomers. A similar finding was reported in a study of elderly satisfaction in Prague's city center. Although the elderly perceived population change and a high level of turnover, a positive appreciation of social support from neighbors dominated (Temelová & Dvořáková, 2012).

This research indicated several factors that seemed to be important in elderly people's evaluations of local social relations:

- (1) *Length of residence and residential stability:* Longer-term residents tend to be more positive in their evaluations of social relations, particularly if they live in houses with stable dwellers. The size of an apartment house also plays a role here; the larger the building, the greater the fluctuation and anonymity of those living there. Length of residence helps to explain the somewhat worse perception of social relations in Nové Butovice compared with the other two study areas. Whereas the average time spent in the neigh-

bourhood was 38 years for respondents in Invalidovna and 25 for those living in Háje, it was only 12 years in the case of Nové Butovice.

- (2) *Life-cycle stage and circumstances of moving:* Those who came to a housing estate at a later age and who were compelled by outside or family circumstances evaluated social relations more negatively. These cases were again found more often in Nové Butovice. Many of the elderly persons interviewed had moved to Nové Butovice at a later age (not when they started families, as was the case with those in the other study areas), already under the conditions of the market economy (the first inhabitants arrived in 1990), and many of them not entirely on their own initiative (e.g., terminated tenement, death of a partner, moving closer to children). It follows that some of them remained rather attached to their previous places of residence, not only maintaining social contacts with people they knew there but also using some of their previous neighbourhoods' services (e.g., a general practitioner). This may have weakened their vulnerability to establishing new social relations in their new places of residence.
- (3) *Dog ownership:* The elderly often establish new social contacts with neighbors while walking their dogs, which enhances their perceptions of social relations.

Housing and residential stability

Although outsiders often judge housing estates as ugly, gray, or monotonous, the perception of local residents typically seems to be much more favorable (Kovács & Herfert, 2012; Maier, 2003; Musil et al., 1985; Musterd & van Kempen, 2005). This finding was also borne out in this research on elderly residents of high-rise neighbourhoods. As was also confirmed in other cities (see, e.g., Kovács & Herfert, 2012), the wide-ranging regeneration and maintenance of panel houses on Prague's estates (new windows, insulation, colored facades, new lifts) clearly contributed to elderly people's satisfaction with housing.

"Back then, our President Havel said that housing estates are rabbit hutches. But they are not rabbit hutches [...] new windows have been put in and many other repairs, so it is very good living here; at least I really feel well here," protested an elderly resident of Invalidovna against the statement of the former Czech president. (IN12, 76 years).

With respect to the financial aspects of housing, the majority of the interviewees claimed that their maintenance and service costs were acceptable to them at the time (since the privatization of the 1990s, a vast majority of people living on housing estates are owner-occupiers). However, two-person households worried that the death of one of the partners would negatively influence their cash-flow balances.

As was discussed earlier, the elderly people interviewed in Nové Butovice mostly came to reside there at later ages, in a different political and economic context, and some of them were compelled by outside or family circumstances. Moving to a panel dwelling did not always mean upgrading their housing standards because some of them had come from family houses or larger inner-city flats. Many elderly residents of Invalidovna and Háje, in contrast, had been living in the neighbourhood for the most part since the first houses were constructed, and they had typically arrived at the stage in life when they established families. Moving to a modern panel dwelling often brought a considerable improvement in their housing standards (floor space, private toilet, hot water, gas), as the following experience documents (see also Barvíková, 2010):

"I moved to here from Karlín (inner-city neighbourhood of Prague, the authors) [...] because I only had one room there and two kids and no heating, nothing, only water. Not even a toilet; there was only a shared one outside in the corridor." (IN3, 84 years).

Different lengths of residence and circumstances of moving obviously also influenced elderly people's attitudes toward their present housing as well as their present residences compared with their previous ones. Most of the respondents from Invalidovna and Háje claimed that they felt more satisfied in the places where they lived at the time of the survey. The elderly from Nové Butovice, on the contrary, largely considered their previous residences better places to live. They tended to compare their current housing and environments with their previous ones more intensively and also more critically. Those who had arrived from a different type of environment (inner city, countryside) had not at the time completely adapted, and their acceptance of high-rise panel housing was lower (compare with analogous findings presented by Musil et al. (1985) in their research from the 1980s).

Although the elderly residents interviewed in Nové Butovice did not complain about anything in particular, their overall satisfaction with the housing estate was lower compared with the feelings of the Invalidovna and Háje respondents (although the majority of the elderly still felt satisfied in Nové Butovice). Nevertheless, most of the respondents in the studied areas did not plan to move away from their places of residence. From that perspective, the elderly population of housing estates can be regarded as relatively stable. Further, as far as the findings of this study indicate, the elderly residents of Prague's housing estates did not seem to belong to the population segment classified by Musterd and van Kempen (2007) as the "unsatisfied trapped," i.e., those who express substantial discontent with their housing but are not able (or willing) to move. However, it must be noted that negative factors (e.g., health problems, financial situations, psychological factors) may still have contributed to the lower likelihood of the elderly to move and thus their higher residential stability. The knowledge gathered here does not allow further conclusions, and focused research into residential decision-making would help to refine these findings.

Concluding remarks

The research presented here investigated elderly residents' neighbourhood satisfaction and their responses to their changing residential environments in three different generations of socialist high-rise housing estates in Prague. The focus was on active neighbourhood users who had experienced daily-changing residential environments. The study supported many of the well-known findings highlighted earlier in sociological and geographical literature, such as the importance of neighbourhood for the elderly, less criticism by older people of the weaknesses of their surroundings, residential conservatism and a preference for known environments, and discrepancies between the internal and external reputations of housing estates (see, e.g., Gilleard et al., 2007; Kovács & Herfert, 2012; Musil, 1982; Musil et al., 1985; Musterd & van Kempen, 2005; Rojo Perez et al., 2001; Sýkorová, 2008; Temelová & Dvořáková, 2012).

However, the study gathered some new knowledge with regard to urban planning and building an age-friendly environment in the high-rise panel neighbourhoods of CEE cities. The elderly inhabitants perceived very sensitively the changes in physical environment, functional structure, and social milieu that had been taking place in housing estates since the 1990s (as with inner cities, see Sýkorová, 2012; Temelová & Dvořáková, 2012). Their appraisal of the conditions and their acceptance of high-rise panel

environments depended as much on their stages in life and the maturity of the housing estates as on the individual circumstances of their moving and how long it had taken to adapt to the new environment (among other factors, including the local conditions of particular housing estates). From the perspectives of the resident elderly, housing estates were seen as convenient places to live, particularly owing to the accessibility of greenery, daily facilities, and public transportation. As the retrospective perceptions of the elderly indicate, satisfaction with these attributes improved markedly over time. This held true for all three studied housing estates, although each of them measured higher on different assets, e.g., greenery, public transportation or service infrastructure. Green spaces are clearly an additional asset of high-rise areas in comparison with central and inner-city neighbourhoods, where the lack of outside recreational spaces ranks among the top problems of inner-city living (Temelová et al., 2010; Temelová & Dvořáková, 2012). This is an asset that policymakers can build on when designing residential and social stabilization strategies for housing estates. In contrast, the lack of safety perceived by some elderly people is an argument for stronger preventative measures to reduce fear of crime among housing estate residents. However, the issue should be seen in the context of similar results obtained in central and inner cities (Temelová & Dvořáková, 2012; Vidovičová & Petrová Kafková, 2012) and the generally higher tendency of the elderly to fear crime (Jíhová & Temelová, 2012).

With respect to the implications of demographic aging for urban neighbourhoods, this study offered some significant evidence. A decline in local everyday facilities might become a threat not only for elderly inhabitants but generally for the residential attractiveness of housing estates hit by intensive demographic aging. Whereas the market economy established after the end of state socialism helped to develop the retail and service infrastructures in areas seen as profitable (e.g., larger housing estates with enough potential consumers but also revitalizing inner-city neighbourhoods, see Temelová & Dvořáková, 2012), smaller and aging housing estates found themselves at risk of deteriorated private facilities and publicly provided services. Compared with the findings reported from Prague's city center, the older residents of housing estates were not confronted with specialized retailing (because of touristification and commercialization), which brings the elderly higher prices and the loss of sources of basic supplies (mainly grocery stores) (Temelová et al., 2010; Temelová & Dvořáková, 2012). This makes older residents' daily consumption costs more acceptable and gives the well-equipped housing estates an additional advantage over the central cities, particularly in light of the significant role that daily shopping fulfils in the physical health and social interactions of the elderly (Vidovičová & Petrová Kafková, 2012).

Moreover, two important issues in regard to the social and residential stability of housing estates emerged from the Czech experience. We believe that the findings both above and below are more general also for other post-socialist panel-built neighbourhoods and have some relevance for practitioners in other locations, particularly with regard to the social stabilization of post-socialist housing estates.

- (1) The elderly represent a relatively attached and stable segment of housing estate populations and thus also potentially important agents of local community building. The elderly residents in this study, however, felt that there was a lower chance of community building in contemporary housing estates as a result of population exchange and diversification, inhabitant turnover and increased numbers of temporary residents. A similar finding was also documented in studies of elderly people living in Prague's revitalizing

inner-city neighbourhoods (Sýkorová, 2012; Temelová & Dvořáková, 2012). The experiences of established local residents seemed to be in accordance with the more general growing diversity and complexity of post-socialist urban structures described by Gentile et al. (2012) as heteropolitization. With the knowledge gathered here, however, it is not possible to draw a straightforward conclusion about the distortion of local community in post-socialist cities (and housing estates particularly), as described by Putnam (2000) in American cities. It might be that different experiences are found when investigating other sociodemographic groups of residents; e.g., Špaček (2012a) found functioning social relations among young families living in housing estates. Herfert et al. (2013) reported growing resident engagement in community initiatives in many CEE panel-built neighbourhoods. Thus, before accepting or denying the thesis of eroding community and social capital in the high-rise neighbourhoods of CEE cities, further investigation is needed to elucidate the impacts of residential mobility and diversification processes on local social relations and community building.

- (2) Our results are not in agreement with Musterd and van Kempen (2007), who found a particularly high share of “unsatisfied trapped” residents in Eastern European housing estates. On the contrary, our study suggests that the majority of elderly people are satisfied with their present residences and do not intend to move away. In line with Temelová et al. (2010), we believe that the elderly as a group are generally not trapped in Prague’s housing estates. We support the conclusion of Herfert et al. (2013), who did not verify the “unsatisfied trapped” thesis in CEE large-scale housing estates. In explaining this result, it is important to note that inhabitants of Prague’s high-rise panel-built neighbourhoods, including the elderly, are mostly owner-occupiers. Moreover, the residential attractiveness of Prague’s housing estates is relatively high (Temelová et al., 2011a), and financial imprisonment in a place is thus less likely. We further hypothesize that more “unsatisfied trapped” elderly may live in Czech inner cities, where the processes of restitution and rent regulation may have forced lower-income groups to stay in regulated rented flats in unsatisfying conditions because financially they cannot afford to enter the private rental sector (Lux & Mikeszova, 2012). This remains only a hypothesis, however, because the existing research on elderly people still reports high satisfaction with their residential environments, including in central and inner cities (Temelová & Dvořáková, 2012; Vidovičová & Petřová Kafková, 2012). This conclusion also refers back to the generally strong emotional attachment of the elderly to a place (e.g., Golant, 1984; Musil, 1982) and their use of various strategies to cope with unpleasant aspects of residential environments and ability to negotiate their own ways of living in a place to avoid relocation (Kendig, 2003; Sýkorová, 2012; Temelová, Novák, Pospíšilová & Dvořáková, 2011b).

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