



Suburban Innovation – Research on the development of Ristinummi and the Olympic Quarter

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INTRODUCTION

This research was carried out in the Suburban Innovation project of the University of Vaasa. The project was funded by the Suburb Programme coordinated by the Ministry of the Environment. Eight researchers have been working part-time on the Suburban Innovation project between 2019 and 2022. The researchers are administrative scientists who worked on various research topics, mainly in the fields of regional studies and public management. The objectives of the project have

been promoted in cooperation with the City of Vaasa, VOAS (Vaasa Student Housing Foundation), the IRIS project (Integrated and Replicable Solutions for Co-Creation in Sustainable Cities) and Kiinteistö Oy Pikipruukki.

The project collected information on the themes related to the development of residential areas through interviews and joint development meetings. The study produced information that can be used to plan place-based development in the areas under research and reduce segregation. The role of residents and co-development has been central to the project. The research information will contribute to the strategic development of residential areas in the city of Vaasa. To this end, the report contains concrete policy recommendations. We will work through these recommendations through our core themes of reputation, community and co-development.

The Ristinummi and Olympic Quarter sites are very different from each other and were built in different eras. Ristinummi, more commonly known as "Nummi", is a typical 1970s Finnish residential area located about 7 km east of Vaasa city centre. The scale of the area is large and loose. Proximity to nature is one of the characteristics of Ristinummi. The nearby Pilvilampi outdoor recreation area and the cultural and historical sites of Old Vaasa give the area its own character. The Variska and Nummi schools are located in the area. At its peak in the mid-1970s and early 1980s, the Ristinummi area was home to around 10,000 people, a time when community spirit and events were strong. A housing fair was held in Ristinummi in 1975. In 2020, the population of the greater area was 7,063. The decline in population is linked, among other things, to the growing popularity of city centre housing

The Olympic Quarter is located in the Vöyrinkaupunki district of the city centre, close to the growing Pohjois-Klemettilä area. It is named after the Olympia engines manufactured by the Finnish Motor Factory, which operated in the area until 1989. Vöyrinkaupunki still has the spirit of a former working-class district. The area survived the central redevelopment and demolition of the 1960s and 1980s relatively well. The Olympic Quarter is built as a compact city block, which emphasises the neighbourhood's independent profile amidst the rest of the older buildings in the Vöyrinkaupunki. The quarter is home to many students and immigrants. A lot of new housing is being built in the immediate vicinity of the quarter. The massive Wasa Station multi-purpose district is also planned for the neighbourhood, which, when completed, will link the Olympic Quarter more closely to the city centre.

PLACE-BASED PERSPECTIVE

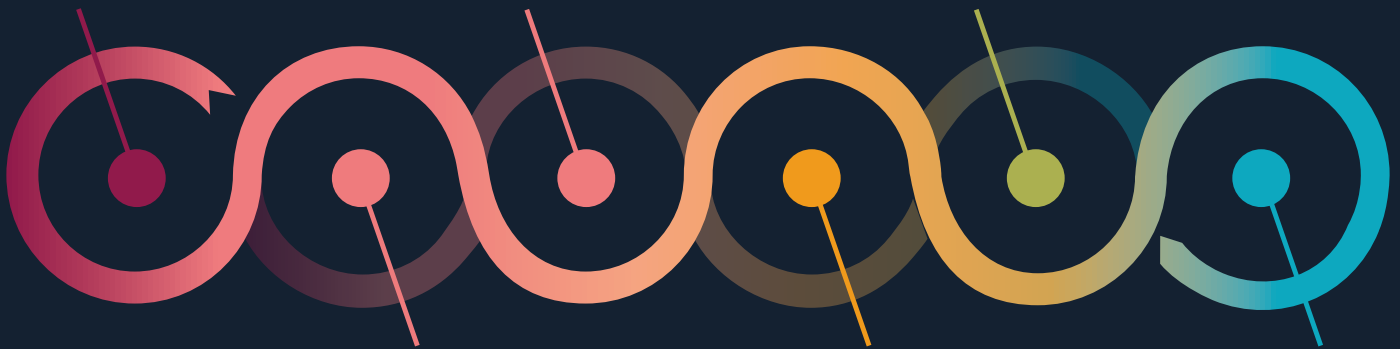
The environmental quality of residential areas is formed in relation to the surrounding areas, transport systems and main forms of the natural landscape. The urban landscape of the area's built environment plays a key role in people's daily lives. Residents become attached to places such as neighbourhoods for very different reasons such as habit, proximity shared by family and friends, necessity or a shared history of place and the individual.

POLICY AND OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

It is important that the Ristinummi and Olympic Quarter areas be positively and comprehensively considered as part of Vaasa's strategic urban development.

The coherence of communication will be improved by sharing local success stories and future perspectives in different media as part of development work.

A place-based model of management across sectors, actors and territorial borders will increase the effectiveness of actions.



Developing shared spaces, services and urban space together with residents, entrepreneurs, city administration and other actors is crucial: even small actions can make a big difference to the quality of life.

It is important for residents to feel that they have been heard: if people's ideas do not result in anything, their trust in the administration and motivation to participate will be eroded.

Interaction between immigrants and the native population should be increased by planning events and spaces that are open to all.

Place-based management involves developing areas together with residents, the city administration and other actors in the area. Place-based management is based on the use of co-development and user innovations. Place-based management identifies the problems, strengths and opportunities of an area, and seeks to develop it with stakeholders from other local areas in a solution-oriented way, drawing on local resources. Cross-sectoral administrative cooperation is also essential.

For example, Ristinummi and the Olympic Quarter have been developed locally, but at the same time using national resources and institutions. The areas have also been developed through cooperation between different sectors of the city administration.

REPUTATION

Both neighbourhoods under research have a poor reputation. This seems to have been built mainly on the views of outsiders, reinforced by some isolated unfortunate events of the past. However, the majority of residents are happy with their neighbourhood and most residents of "Nummi" say that it is a better place than its reputation would lead one to believe. In residential areas, there are often isolated places where problems or problematic behaviour are concentrated. These individual sites have a stigmatising

impact on the reputation of the neighbourhood as a whole. Residents also want the neighbourhood and its buildings to be better looked after. A dirty and run-down area reinforces a bad reputation. A visually appealing and clean living environment enhances the positive experience and perception of a neighbourhood by residents and those from outside the neighbourhood.

Perceptions of the reputation of suburban neighbourhoods have varied over time. In our research material, the early days of the establishment of Ristinummi in the 1970s and 1980s were described in a positive and nostalgic tone. The 1990s in particular are described as a troubled time in Ristinummi, which is the main source of negative images of the neighbourhood. The Olympic Quarter has a shorter history as a residential area. Positive comments on reputation relate to the feeling of a sense of community and a 'we' spirit in the Olympic Quarter. However, the quarter's past cannot be seen as strong a period of positive publicity as Ristinummi's in the 1970s and 1980s. Instead, the Olympic Quarter was criticised during its design and construction.

Our research data showed that reputation is a complex issue, meaning different things depending on how you interpret it. For some young people, an unattractive area or having a certain kind of roughness in it is an important part of their



Photo 2. The view from the courtyard of the Q building in Olympic Quarter.



Photo 1. A housing fair was organized in Ristinummi in 1975.

identity and a way of distinguishing themselves from other neighbourhoods in Vaasa.

Reputation, as we interpret it, is based on social storytelling, where the past, experiences of the present, media visibility and future expectations of the areas are mixed together. Stigmas are created and reinforced through individual events and prejudices. Less attention has been paid to the more positive future prospects of the areas. Residents in particular value their neighbourhoods, while non-residents reinforce the negative images associated with them.

COMMUNITY SPIRIT

In the at Suburban Innovation project, we also explored the perceptions of residents, public officials and politicians about the sense of community in the areas being studied. We identified three main concepts from interviews. According to the first, community spirit is based on doing things together, such as grilling sausages, playing volleyball or holding skiing competitions. In addition to outdoor events, interviewees stressed that community spirit also requires shared indoor spaces. People from immigrant backgrounds in particular wanted spaces where there is a low threshold for meeting the native population. They expressed a desire for better interaction with Finns.

The second concept draws attention to the decline and disintegration of community spirit. A common feeling, especially among older respondents who have lived in the area the longer,

is that there was more community spirit and a greater variety of communal activities and opportunities in the past than there is now. The third concept relates to the community spirit of immigrants and to its specific characteristics. Immigrants' sense of community may be interpreted in very different ways inside and outside their community.

Public officials' perception of community spirit is based on the idea of creating conditions and providing concrete events, staff, projects and facilities. Community spirit is also defined and maintained digitally through social media. Opinions and cultures connected to residential areas are now expressed and groupings are built as much on mobile devices as in face-to-face encounters.

A sense of community can be fostered through a common language, a common way of doing things and commonly agreed commitments and rules. The development of day care, schools and leisure facilities in an area will foster a sense of community in those areas. Community spirit in suburban neighbourhoods is diverse and should no longer be defined only in terms of the sense of community experienced by the native population.

UNDERSTANDING OF DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNICATION

We interviewed a number of city actors that are in different ways in contact with the areas being studied, the Olympic Quarter and Ristinummi. The interviews painted a picture in which the problems of the areas such as reputation were commonly recognised. For example, the lack of a sense of community and the problems of reputation described above came up in several interviews. However, how and by whom these issues should be addressed varied between the interviews. Another important observation was that the extensive development work carried out by the city and university was not necessarily well known among stakeholders and within the city organisation. Place-based management has

the potential to improve the flow of information within and between organisations. In the future, it will be important to pay even more attention to communicating neighbourhood development and finding common ground. This is essential for the discovery of sustainable solutions, and requires broad commitment within organisations.

CO-DEVELOPMENT WITH RESIDENTS IN DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS

Co-development was a key way of involving residents in our project. Our findings show that digital co-development has both inclusive and non-inclusive elements. Time- and place- independence are factors that contribute to inclusiveness. People who would find it difficult to participate in co-development due to time, distance or mobility constraints could participate remotely from their homes or shared facilities. Some of the CUPLs (Community Urban Planning Lab) were held at a day centre for non-working people, so that visitors to the day centre could participate in the sessions via a shared screen.

On the other hand, for some people digital co-development undermines inclusion. The use of digital technologies can make it difficult for people with lower digital skills, language skills or lack of access to co-development equipment and software to participate.

The use of digital technology in the project was based on group meetings on a virtual communication platform. It is a good example of how the digitalisation of public administration and public services is not only about the development of digital services, but should be understood as a broader culture-shaping phenomenon, where citizens also develop the city in virtual spaces, and need support to do so. Good forward planning is essential to reaping the benefits and avoiding the problems of this phenomenon: digital co-development should be made a permanent, structured part of urban development processes, together with "traditional" co-development.



Photo 3. Teboil in Ristinummi was an important meeting place for residents before it was closed down.

During the Suburban Innovation programme, the City of Vaasa will pilot map-based resident participation, a form of digital co-development, providing place-based experience data on residential areas. As the use of such digital technologies can be difficult for many to access, they should not be the only way to involve residents. Co-development can help to create a culture that involves as many stakeholders as possible, and takes into account inclusive perspectives.

INNOVATION AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Cities have already been identified in the past as important centres of innovation because of their dense structure. In cities, people, ideas and organisations come together in a natural way thanks to the advantages of proximity.

Innovation-driven urban development has been a global trend in recent years, with technological smart-city solutions, clusters focused on specific skills and innovation districts receiving increasing attention. In addition to new products, technologies and other innovations produced by companies and research institutes, users and city residents can also play the role of innovators and creators of ideas. More recently, the importance of participatory innovation activity itself and its benefits have also gained increasing ground in innovation research. In this project, we set out to involve the city's residents in the ideation part of the innovation process. Although this project does not allow practical implementation, the results of the activities are briefly described below.

THE PROXIMITY OF NATURE AND SERVICES CENTRAL TO RISTINUMMI

Residents have experience-based knowledge of their own neighbourhoods, and it is important to use this knowledge in decision-making. In Ristinummi, the proximity of nature and services such as a grocery shop, school and day care centre were important to residents. Based on our data, Ristinummi residents are mostly happy in their neighbourhood. However, improvements are needed, for example in the form of the renovation of the older housing stock, development of the old shopping centre, and inclusive leisure activities where there is something to do for everyone, regardless of language or socio-economic status. They also wanted to see improvements in public transport links, especially to the central hospital and the city centre where the Ristinummi medical services have moved to. Accessibility could be improved by, for example, elevated bus stops. Specific requests included a gym, children's play areas and a meeting place for Ristinummi residents to meet other residents and organise civic activities. Young people also needed safe and meaningful leisure and recreational facilities. Consideration of the far-reaching nature and continuity of development was also considered important.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT DIGITAL CO-DEVELOPMENT TO EMPOWER RESIDENTS

Plan your co-development carefully. Choose your method according to the target group, and also produce materials in plain English and in several other languages.



Choose the digital technologies to be used, taking into account user groups: consider whether the technology you plan to use is accessible to all.



Ensure professional facilitation. The whole process requires a keen eye on the part of the facilitator to ensure that participants are motivated, and feel trusted and heard.



Think about the group dynamics that are generated in a co-development situation. Co-development events bring together a group of participants to discuss and produce shared knowledge. The success of such events depends to a large extent on how the Co-development process is designed. The design takes into account equal opportunities for participants to take part in the debate. This can be influenced by the kind of group divisions you make or the kind of shared space you produce. In virtual situations, keeping the camera on or off, for example, plays a big role in group dynamics.



THE LOCATION OF THE OLYMPIC QUARTER SIGNIFICANT

The Olympic Quarter was seen as a good thing because of its proximity to the city centre and services such as schools, shops and day care centres. Nevertheless, not all residents have access to preschools near the Olympic Quarter. Some respondents found it challenging to take their child to Metsäkallio by public transport, especially if they then had to return to the city centre to work. Suggestions for improvements included better accessibility to preschool, and after-school activities for children and young people, such as clubs. Supporting car-free travel was also considered important. It was felt that road safety could be improved with adequate gritting and ploughing of the streets in winter.

It was also hoped that the overall appearance of the Olympic Quarter would be revamped, and its places improved. At the moment, the potential of the central square in the Olympic Quarter is not being fully exploited. Residents' suggestions for the square included better play areas for children and seating for adults, a supervised barbecue shelter for residents, and safe recreational facilities such as a volleyball court or a panna football cage. The square could also be used for events such as yard sales or residents' meetings. There was also a desire to renovate older apartments in the Olympic Quarter.

EVEN SMALL ACTIONS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Residents' comments and wishes show that changes do not have to be world-class innovations to improve the lives of residents. Place-

based management can be used to coordinate the implementation of small but important individual actions or initiatives for residents. While big investments and projects such as the battery factory plans near Ristinummi and Wasa Station beside the Olympic Quarter are important, attracting talent to the area also requires opportunities for a good life outside work, as well as leisure activities for families, for example. Ristinummi has potential as a residential area, but residents are concerned about the loss of services and the lack of recreational opportunities, which threaten to further denude the area. The Olympic Quarter also has potential for compact, community-based housing right in the heart of the city centre, if residents' development proposals are listened to. Attention should also be paid to accessibility and availability, especially with the increasing shift to e-services and the concentration of activities in the city centre.

RESIDENTS' DAYS

Residents' Days for our project were held in Ristinummi and the Olympic Quarter on 20 and 21 April 2022. In Ristinummi, we set up a tent in front of the Kultanummi village centre, and had a chat with the residents over coffee and cake. Some of the people who came had already been informed about the event, but others just happened to stop by along the way. Everyone was keen to see the area developed, and many expressed their desire for services and the renovation of buildings. Among other things, a group of young people who stopped for a cup of coffee hoped that the empty spaces in the old shopping centre would be made available to young people for leisure activities.

In the central square of the Olympic Quarter, we served chocolate cake and coffee prepared by a local business.

Improving the central square and its overall cleanliness was seen as important by many. However, residents considered the Olympic Quarter a peaceful place to live. We noticed that the Olympic Quarter is home to a very diverse range of people: we chatted with university employees from foreign backgrounds, students and disadvantaged members of the native population. Despite their different backgrounds, the residents were willing to organise events and were keen to develop the courtyard areas.

THIS IS HOW THE SURVEY WAS CONDUCTED

The research project was carried out under quite exceptional circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic spread rapidly around the world in early 2020 causing extensive social lockdowns. Our two-year project hit the middle of the pandemic, which meant that we had to rethink our data collection plans.

Transparency, trust, adequate access to information and accountability are typical elements of co-development. The development method of our project was Community Urban Planning Labs, or CUPLs, which were implemented as digital co-development meetings on account of coronavirus, and a feeling of space was created through images, guiding words and maps. In the digital "laboratories", the residents of the Olympic



Photo 4. The compass rose and the spacious central square of the Olympic Quarter.



Photo 5. A neighbourhood day organized by researchers on April 21, 2022 in the central square of the Olympic Quarter.

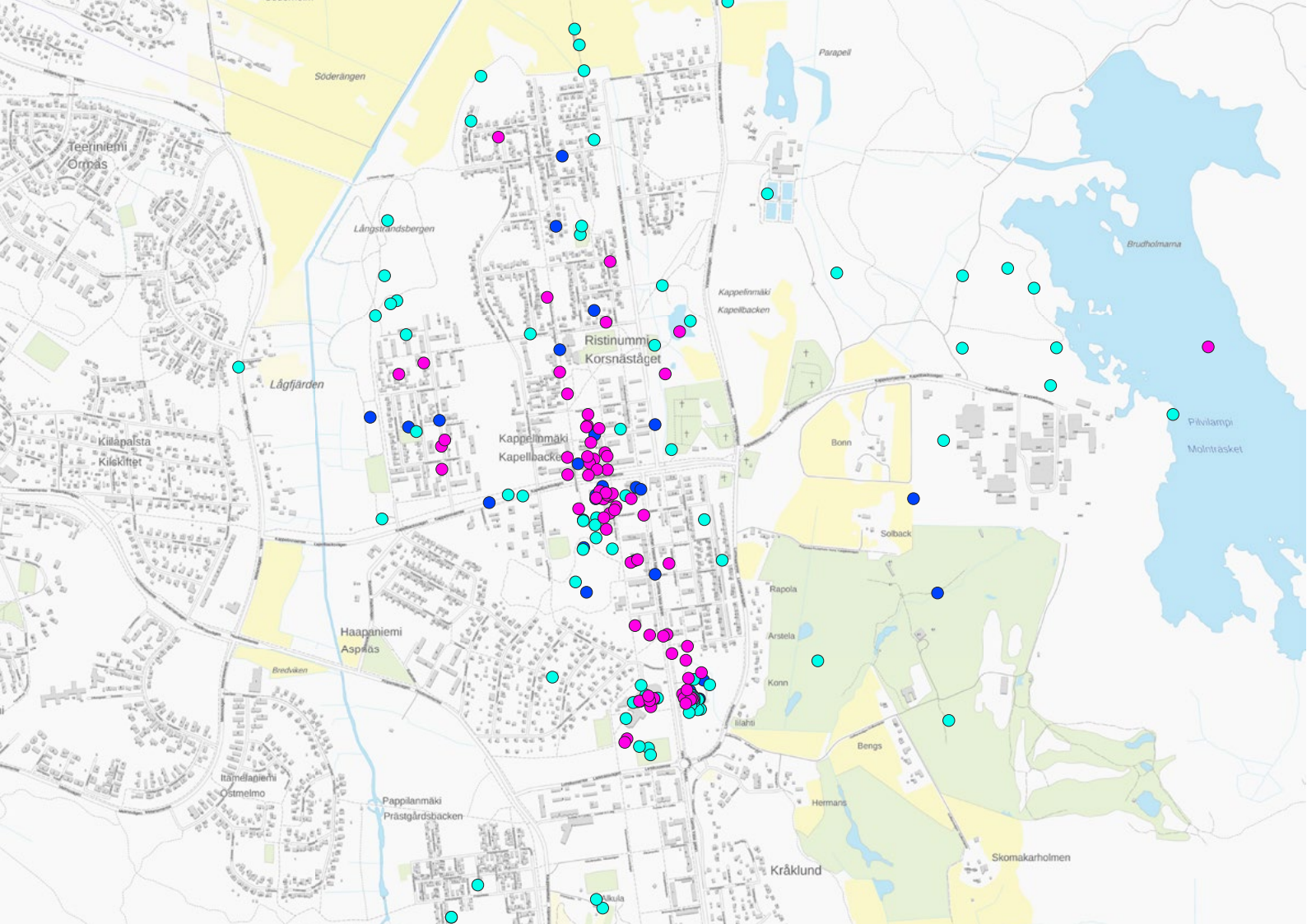
Quarter and Ristinummi reflected together on the things that were important to them in their neighbourhoods, what they thought was good and efficient, and what needed improvement. In selecting participants, we aimed to take into account different groups of people, especially those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds such as immigrants, inactive people, young people, elderly people and those with disabilities.

In addition to the seven CUPL sessions (30 participants), we interviewed a large number (N=26) of actors involved in the development of residential areas: City of Vaasa officials, politicians, residents, representatives of organisations and communities, and entrepreneurs. The themes of the interviews were personal relationships to

the area, perceptions and characteristics of the areas, expectations of development work, inclusion and networks.

We also attended several events and meetings on topics related to the areas being studied. Although many of the informal encounters with different actors did not represent actual research material, they nevertheless contributed to our perceptions of the functioning and quality of urban governance.

Students of Administrative Sciences at the University of Vaasa conducted



Map 1. Favourite places indicated by residents to students are shown on the map in turquoise and unpleasant places in pink.

a map-based survey of Vaasa residents as part of the Regional Development Project course. In spring 2022, we travelled to Ristinummi with students, where they asked local residents for their opinions on Ristinummi as a residential area. In addition, the survey was distributed online. The map above shows the results of the survey. Respondents' favourite places are marked in turquoise, intimidating or otherwise unpleasant places in pink, and places with different urban stories or incidents in blue. The image shows that the popular sites are spread over a wide area in Ristinummi, for example in the surrounding nature. Unpleasant places are more concentrated around the old shopping centre and local market, even though the market was also a favourite place for many. The majority of the respondents were young people under 20 years of age, but there were representatives of all

ages. Background map: National Land Survey of Finland (NLS). Map-based survey: Maplix.

THE RISTINUMMI SUBURB PROJECT

The greater Ristinummi area has been developed through a variety of measures during the Ministry of the Environment's Suburb Programme 2020–2022. Due to the orientation of the Suburb Programme funding, the focus has been on the repair and development of the built environment and infrastructure. This has been a systematic and well-programmed effort involving almost all the departments of the City of Vaasa, which shows the importance and value of cross-sector administration in the development of a resi-



Photo 6. The soon to be demolished old shopping centre in Ristinummi, a breadline weaving in the background.

dential area. The key service network measure implemented during the neighbourhood project is the extension of Variska School into a comprehensive school.

The Ristinummi neighbourhood project, led by the City of Vaasa, has worked closely with the University of Vaasa's Suburban Innovation project, particularly on measures to increase resident participation and prevent segregation in neighbourhoods. Multi-method resident participation has provided a lot of valuable experience from the residents of Ristinummi, which has been used to formulate the guidelines for the further development of the area. One of the topics discussed with the researchers of the Suburban Innovation project is what can be done to alleviate segregation.

At the heart of the further development of Ristinummi is housing development, both for new residential areas and the renovation and partial demolition of the old tenement stock. Another important further development is to reduce school segregation by developing the area's network of day care centres and schools.

Jonas Nýlen, City of Vaasa

MEGATRENDS IN HOUSING

VOAS sees the findings of the Suburban Innovation project as key to the foundation's plans for the Olympic Quarter. The big megatrends in housing, such as multi-location housing and the servitisation of rental housing, create interesting development paths for the development of the Olympic Quarter. From the foundation's point of view, the most important thing is to find an owner for the city-owned apartments in the Olympic Quarter, alongside VOAS, whose priority is to genuinely develop the quarter on the basis of researched data. The future of the foundation looks positive, although new housing megatrends are challenging both the foundation and subsidised housing in general. A certain strictness in the ARA (The Housing Finance and Development Centre of Finland) guidelines is in some cases even an obstacle to servitisation. To ensure that the foundation's activities remain sustainable over time, the guidelines that steer them must also keep pace with megatrends.

Marko Ylimäki, VOAS

StrateGIS METHOD

What makes a neighbourhood a pleasant place to live? The HYVIÖ project of the Finnish Environment Institute (SYKE) and the National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) collected new information on the current state and development needs of the Ristinummi residential area together with planners and experts in the area. Residents' views on the amenities of their neighbourhood were also surveyed. In remote workshops for planners, participants first set general development objectives for the Ristinummi area. Participants then identified and rated the amenity factors that were important for the objective, using the map-based StrateGIS tool. SYKE researchers produced maps of the assessment work, illustrating the distribution of amenity factors in different neighbourhoods. In Ristinummi, planners identified the accessibility of residents' recreational facilities, local shops and playparks as the most important factors contributing to a pleasant way of life.

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