



CITY CENTRE RESIDENTS' OPINION ON INNER QUARTER RENEWAL: A CENTRAL EUROPEAN CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Since the political change of regime in 1990, tendencies previously characteristic of Western European urban areas, such as city centre regeneration, revitalization, gained momentum in post-communist cities as well. The ruined city centres' renewal aimed at the creation of liveable surroundings. The goal of this article is to explore how residents of Debrecen, East Hungary, viewed the regeneration of the city centre, what this process meant to them and what kind of positive and negative results could be observed in relation to the surroundings' alteration.

Key words

Cities in post-communist countries, Debrecen, Urban renewal, Questionnaire survey, residents' opinion.

INTRODUCTION

Local governments have striven for the regeneration of post-communist city centres since the beginning of the 1990s. In this process, the revitalization of city centres ruined during the decades of socialism played a vital role (Matlovič, 2014). The creation of more liveable cities was one of the most important objectives of such projects. On the one hand, residents were offered new physical, more comfortable surroundings. On the other hand, these changes also brought about unexpected reactions: some welcomed the changes, while others had doubts about them.

In the spirit of the above the aim of this article is to explore the various reactions of downtown Debrecen residents to city centre renewal and analyse the differences of opinions in view of the respondents' sex, age, education and type of housing.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

During the last decades, different periods of downtown development were distinguished by researchers (Egedy and Kovács, 2005; Horváth, 2019). After World War II, during the 1940s and 1950s, one of the most important aims of urban reconstruction was clearing ruined quarters and building new ones. The new period of urban

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revitalization, which appeared in the 1960s and dominated the 1970s, focused on the restoration of buildings built before World War II. In the next decade, a new component emerged by the name of urban renewal. As a new element of these processes it could be witnessed that instead of projects financed by government resources, local governments and private capital appeared among the investors.

Since the 1990s the concept of sustainability has gained more terrain, and it generated the new approach called urban regeneration. There is no consensus on the exact meaning of this concept. Kazimierczak and Kosmowski define it as: 'Urban regeneration consists in the multifaceted revitalisation of urban areas deprived of their economic, social and technical livelihoods. Although it focuses on areas of diverse origin and functions, it always aims at improving the quality of space (landscape) and utility, including the housing function' (Kazimierczak and Kosmowski, 2018, p. 37). According to Hall, urban regeneration is a proactive set of interventions designed primarily to ameliorate against the negative consequences of urban decline (Hall, 2006, p. 57). Nevertheless, Robert's definition is the most widely embraced by researchers. In his view, 'urban regeneration is a comprehensive and integrated vision and action which leads to the resolution of urban problems and which seeks to bring about a lasting improvement in the economic, physical, social and environmental condition of an area that has been subject to change' (Roberts, 2010, p. 17.).

In the Central European region, the above tendencies appeared to varying extent. After World War II, demolition of the severely damaged inner quarters could be observed mainly in big cities (e.g. Warsaw, Berlin) (Horváth, 2019). It was followed by the construction of new residential buildings suited to the socialist architectural concept. After the change of regime – drawing on the first experiences in the 1980s – projects were launched in many countries (Keresztély and Scott, 2012; Matlovič et al., 2014; Hlavacek et al., 2016; Sykora, 2017; Strykiewicz et al., 2018; Nedučín et al., 2019).

The most essential component of the investigation is the analysis of the impact of the projects. It is carried out by the application of two methods. Firstly, the positive and the negative results of the alterations are demonstrated by statistical data and, secondly, the projects' impacts are examined through surveys studying mainly residents' opinion (Bucher et al., 2013). Research of the first type examines, for example, institutions which offer both leisure and entertainment activities and may be increasingly important in the cities' everyday life (Nedučín et al., 2019). Research may also indicate advantages offered by the renewed buildings, or the development in commercial or business life (Guimarães, 2017).

Some questionnaire surveys show that the increasing demand for parking place is a serious problem (Hlavacek et al., 2016), while others find a growing need for public recreation space and residential buildings (Kunc et al., 2014). Other surveys



discuss the improvement of public security and interpersonal relationships as important factors (Jalaludin et al., 2012). According to a survey carried out among businesses, residents, and customers, 'the improvements encourage private investment' as well (Kozma, 1998; Bromley et al., 2003).

Several questionnaire surveys examine the relationship between residents and the renewed quarters. A special group of these surveys deals with elderly people's satisfaction with improved surroundings (Temelová and Dvořáková, 2012), or the youngest generation's attitude to the regeneration projects and their needs (O'Brien et al., 2000).

Among other issues, Albertini and her co-authors call attention to the varying priorities of different parties involved in regeneration projects. They state that 'the residents and the public officials/stakeholders care about several aspects of urban regeneration and sustainability, and that in some cases their views are sharply different' (Albertini et al., 2006). Murzyn arrives at a similar conclusion when she states that 'the private, public and local interests and needs are often divergent and hard to reconcile'. In her view, 'the main problem involves the functioning of the quarter as an attractive leisure and entertainment area versus its residential function' (Murzyn, 2006).

Yet another essential issue is how the relationship between the city centre and the city's other parts may have changed in the last decades (Matlovič and Sedláková, 2007).

THE BACKGROUND

In the 20th century there was a lapse in the centuries-old organic development of Debrecen's historical city centre. The differences within the city centre are partly the result of the terrible destruction during World War II, and partly of the (socialist) reconstruction. Some inner quarters' rebuildings during the communist regime and the projects carried out with varying success after the change of regime also contributed to the area's uneven development. Due to the above mentioned factors, there are substantial differences in the built environment and the role and function of city centre quarters of Debrecen.

In spite of socialist development programs, by the time of the change of regime, the major part of the central area had become severely dilapidated therefore various city regeneration projects were recommended to be planned by experts (Süli-Zakar, 1994).

The different regeneration projects launched around the turn of the millennium have changed the historical city centre of Debrecen to a great extent. In particular, the main square (Kossuth Square) and its near surroundings have been radically altered. The city centre's changes (the importance of city regeneration in Debrecen and its effects) and the development of residential areas have been discussed by



the authors of the present article in several publications (Kecskés, 2015., 2018., Kozma, 2016). It should also be noted that these projects have had various effects on diverse parts of the city centre (e.g. residential areas developed differently), and we believe that some areas show greater changes than others.

Based on the findings of our questionnaire survey, this study shows how city centre residents view these regeneration projects. It is of vital importance to Debrecen's city centre's regeneration, because no similar studies have been conducted in the field.

DATA AND METHODS

This study is based on former social-geographical surveys conducted by the Department of Social Geography and Regional Development Planning and the Sociology and Social Policy Department of the University of Debrecen. The questionnaire charted by sociologist Csaba Béres and his co-workers was also used by the authors of this study (Béres, 1996).

The novelty of this study partly derives from its topic, city regeneration from residents' point of view, and from our contention that distinct housing types are a crucial component of residents' reception of regeneration projects. In comparison with former surveys, since the selection of respondents of this study was based on types of housing and surroundings, the research covered a much greater area than similar surveys had done. It included almost the entire historical city centre.

The basis of this survey are the results of questionnaires answered by city centre residents in summer 2019. The questionnaires provide information on residents' relationship with the regenerated, renewed city centre and how these changes have affected the respondents' neighbourhood.

A simple random sampling method was used during the interviews: respondents were visited by pollsters in their homes, and 160 questionnaires were answered. In addition to determining sampling criteria, it was also important that respondents come from diverse parts of the historical city centre, live in various types of dwellings, and are of different age, too.

Based on the questions on the types of residential buildings, four categories of dwellings within the historical city centre were found (Fig. 1):

1. Multi-storey block of flats built before 1945, mainly found in the main street or its close vicinity (1.).
2. Housing complex (groups of blocks of flats) in the historical city centre, built after World War II. They usually consist of four- or ten-storeyed brick or block buildings (2/a, 2/b, 2/c).
3. Multi-storey block of flats, built after the change of regime in diverse parts of the historical city centre (3.).



- Survey results were recorded in an Excel file, and data was processed with IBM SPSS Statistics 23.



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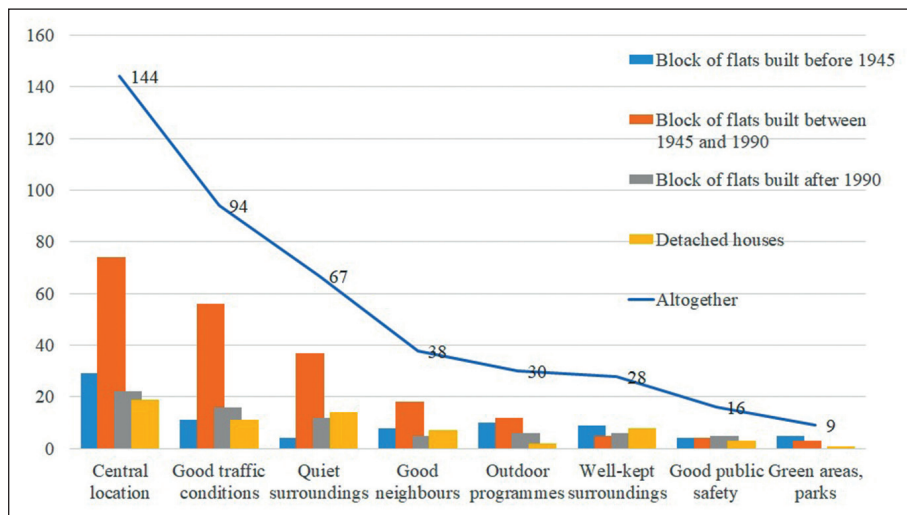


Figure 2

Benefits of the location

Source: own survey

Each group responded that the central location was the most important benefit. (Fig. 2).

Irrespective of types of housing, the most frequently cited advantages were the central location and, closely related to it, good traffic conditions. Three groups of respondents ranked the latter as second. As regards the order of benefits, quiet surroundings were generally the third. Although a lot of respondents said that their neighbourhood was quiet, the exact opposite was also stated by residents of the same street or even the same block of flats! Only residents of detached houses with a garden ranked the importance of 'quiet surroundings' second on the list of advantages. The explanation of this ranking lies in the fact that the majority of detached houses are located in Debrecen's historical city centre, far from crowded high streets, usually in the quieter side streets. Residents bought the properties in this part of the city centre because they wanted to live in a peaceful neighbourhood.

Among residents of multi-storey blocks of flats (except for those living in houses built before 1945), the quiet surroundings was the third most important positive factor. The importance of good neighbours and outdoor programmes were placed after the above mentioned points. The number of green areas, their condition (some of them were full of rubbish and untended), and the lack of public safety (primarily the presence of homeless people in the vicinity of residential buildings and in the stairways) were mentioned as the least positive characteristics. These were put at the end of the list because residents found them to be the most serious problems in their area.

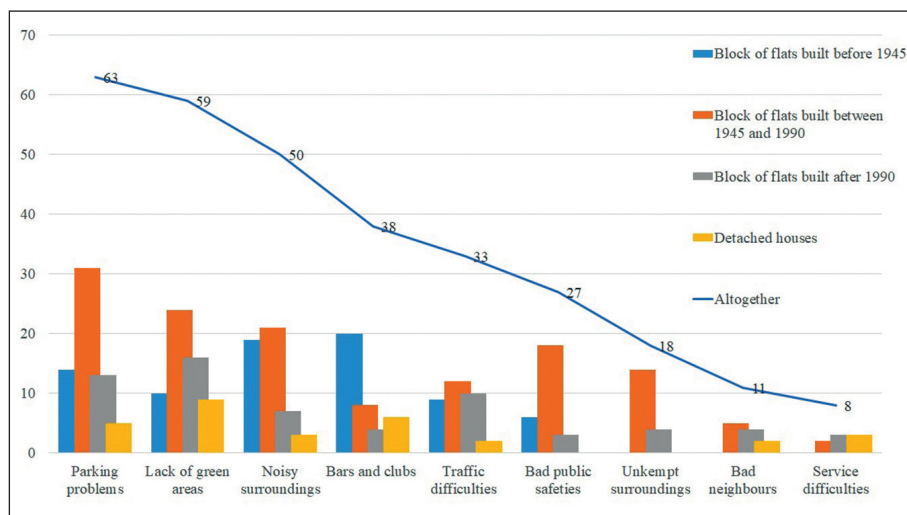


Figure 3
Disadvantages in the surroundings
Source: own survey

Unlike in the case of positive factors, responses on the negative features by residents of the four types of dwellings showed no consonance. But shortage of parking space and expensive parking fees were mentioned almost unanimously in the first place as the greatest problem for (almost) everybody (Fig. 3).

Parking problems in Debrecen originate from increasing motorisation and the relatively few car parks and underground garage, which cannot keep up with the demands. Another problem is that parking is not free, in fact, sometimes, rather pricy, almost everywhere in the historical city centre of Debrecen.

Only residents who live in blocks of flats built before 1945 said that the noise caused by outdoor programmes (concerts, festivals, etc.) is more disturbing than parking problems. A relatively large number of respondents living in the city centre's housing estates mentioned noise as a disturbing factor as well. They often complained about the noise of motor vehicles (this is a problem mostly in the busy Csapó Street), and the same respondents also complained of nightly disorderly behaviour of customers of places of entertainment. (The latter also troubled those respondents who live near the main square.) For this reason, some respondents think that public safety is lacking. The unwanted presence of the homeless who settled near residential buildings was mentioned among the problems as well. For respondents living in detached houses, the disturbing factors might not be related to the outdoor programmes organised on the main square or its surroundings. We found that instead of outdoor programmes, these residents may experience drunken patrons of nearby pubs and bars to be a threat to public safety.



A relatively large number of respondents marked the lack of parks and green areas among the negative factors, and even if there were some recreational areas near their housing, they were neglected and were usually heavily littered. The majority of respondents living in flats built after 1990 marked this factor as the greatest problem of their surroundings. (It is important to note that the lack of green areas and the regeneration of parks have resulted in the Green City Project of Debrecen. As a result, in the past few years, a lot of park renewal projects have been started (or were finished) in various parts of the city.)

Heavy traffic and the lack of public transportation services were also indicated as negative features by those who live farther from the city's main roads, mostly in the hard-to-reach side streets. For example, for residents of detached houses, the lack of transportation services may occur as a specific problem. The background of this problem may well be the greater distance from main roads, where a lot of shops and service facilities are located.

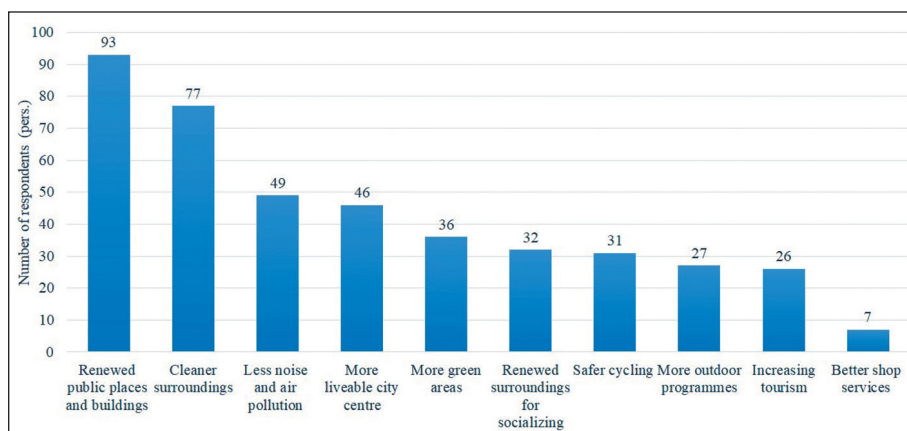


Figure 4
The importance of city centre regeneration for respondents
(respondents could mark three options)

Source: own survey

The second group of survey questions addressed the city centre's renewal. The authors wanted to collect data on why the city centre's regeneration is important for residents and what their opinion is about projects that have already been finished. Based on respondents' expectations, we conclude that besides renewed public places and buildings, respondents believe the neat and clean environment to be the most important factor (Fig. 4).

Residents also found the reduction in noise and air pollution important and it substantially contributed to the sense of more liveable surroundings. Respondents



thought that the formation and extension of green areas could secure the improvement of their quality of life. As regards importance, perhaps the low ranking of outdoor programmes in pedestrian zones is the most surprising. We propose two possible explanations. Firstly, the number of aged city centre residents is high, and their majority has not attended such events yet. Secondly, although it was not always unambiguous, these programmes, which often entail noise and littering, can be troublesome for residents.

In general, the development of the city centre was received positively: more than one third of respondents (36%) thought that the quarter's renewal had a positive effect on their surroundings (Fig. 5), and only one fifth of them (20%) said that the renewal had no effect on their surroundings. Considering the dimension of the alteration of the city centre, these data may be surprising. The changes mainly affected the sparsely populated and fancy inner part of the city centre, crowded with shops and offices, but the more populous and traditional sections of the centre behind the main street were left out, that is, the city's inner residential quarters are still waiting for major alteration. In general, 11% of respondents had a negative attitude towards the changes. Some factors, such as the above-mentioned noise, dirt and the presence of homeless people could contribute to it. 10% of respondents were indecisive on this question.

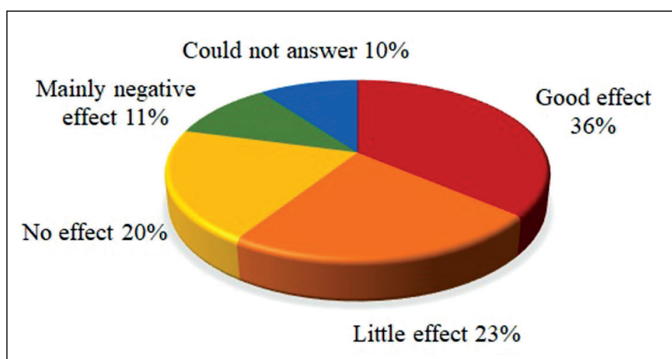


Figure 5

Renewed city centre's effect on respondents' surroundings

Source: own survey

In relation to accomplished projects, significant differences can be observed among the different dwelling categories (Table 1).

A large proportion of respondents living in blocks of flats built before 1945 thought that the regeneration of the city centre had a good effect on their surroundings. We can state that the people living near the city's main square profited the most from the city centre's renewal and modernisation. Nevertheless, it is in-



Table1 Renewed city centre's effect on the respondents' surroundings (%)

Renewal's effect	Block of flats			Detached houses
	Built before 1945	Built between 1945 and 1990	Built after 1990	
Good effect	50.0	28.0	26.1	57.1
Little effect	16.7	24.0	43.5	4.8
No effect	6.7	30.7	13.0	9.5
Mainly negative effect	20.0	5.3	13.0	14.3
No answer	6.7	12.0	4.3	14.3

Source: *own survey*

interesting to note that the proportion of ranking the changes mainly negative was the highest in this group. One of the reasons can be the annoying effect of some outdoor programmes organised in those public places that were altered into pedestrian zones in the last decades. The other reason can be the banning of motor vehicles from the public areas of the city centre resulting in residents experiencing restriction in movement and parking problems (parking restrictions, high parking fees, etc.).

Although divided on some aspects, the greatest proportion of people living in blocks of flats built between 1945 and 1990 thought that the renewal of the city centre did not have any effect on their surroundings. The explanation to such inconsistency may be that these flats are the most heterogeneous in terms of their condition and, in many cases, the spectacular investments of different city regeneration projects have avoided the surroundings of these buildings. We must note that people living in the middle section of the busy Csapó Street or in Vármegyerháza Street, that is, hidden behind Piac Street, which is as important as the main square in Debrecen, or farther from the city centre (e.g. residents of Wesselényi housing complex) could hardly experience the regeneration of inner quarters.

In comparison with the other three types, blocks of flats built after 1990 are spread throughout the city centre. They are located not only in the close neighbourhood of Kossuth Square and Piac Street, but at the edge of the historical city centre, along busy main roads and in quieter side streets as well. The majority of respondents in this type of housing thought that the regeneration and renewal of the city centre had only a little effect on their surroundings. This may indicate a cautious, but a fundamentally positive attitude towards the regeneration of the city centre.

As concerns the connection between the regeneration of the city centre and surroundings, answers by residents of detached houses were the most surprising.



Compared to other groups, the ratio of respondents who thought that the regeneration of the city centre positively affected their surroundings was the highest here (57%). It is remarkable because the majority of this kind of houses are usually located far from those parts of the city centre that were involved in the alteration. The reason may be that respondents are aware of the alteration and development of the city centre, too. On the other hand, the changes either did not have any negative effects at all or only to a small extent. These residents may visit programmes organised in the renewed public places, but they are not disturbed by the noise, their areas are not littered, and they do not have to face parking problems every day. On the whole, they belong to that group of Debrecen residents who mainly enjoy the advantages of the alteration of the city centre. As compared to all four groups, the ratio of those who could not answer what effect the regeneration of the city centre had on their surroundings was the highest here. They were, in part, the same respondents who took the longest time to answer this question and were uncertain about the regeneration's effects on their surroundings.

The examination of respondents' age and sex led to the following conclusions:

The interviews indicated that it is predominantly the elderly residents who welcomed the changes and their extent. It is most likely rooted in the fact that the elderly had seen the former condition of the city centre and they have a basis of comparison. On the other hand, respondents from younger age groups were born into these circumstances and, due to their age, cannot remember what the situation was two decades ago.

A comparison of answers by male and female respondents shows that the majority of both groups think that the various regeneration projects have contributed to the significant development of the city centre. Among female respondents, the highest ratio is of those who find the changes positive. The total percentage of women who marked "a lot of developments" or 'developments' is 86%. This ratio is 77% in the male group. In both the male and the female group, the ratio of respondents not satisfied with changes (those who do not recognize the development or mainly see the disadvantages of regeneration) was under 5% (Table 2).

In view of respondents' educational background, we can state that respondents with higher level of education (university or college degree) appreciate the alteration of the city centre more than those with less schooling (respondents with different secondary school qualifications). 89% of respondents with more education thought that a lot of developments helped the renewal of the city centre or these developments were sufficient. More than three quarters (76%) of respondents with lower qualification marked the advantages of the changes as well. Almost one quarter of them thought that the results achieved were not sufficient (Fig. 6-7).



Table 2 Men and women's opinion – in different age groups – about regeneration (%)

	Men				Women			
	18-39	40-59	60-x	Total	18-39	40-59	60-x	Total
Lots of developments	4.7	8.1	11.3	24.2	4.6	14.9	17.2	36.9
Developments	21.0	21.0	11.3	53.2	13.8	20.7	14.9	49.4
Few developments	6.5	11.3	0.0	17.8	4.6	2.3	1.1	8.0
No developments	0.0	1.6	0.0	1.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Mostly negative effects	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.3	2.3
No answer	0.0	0.0	3.2	3.2	2.3	0.0	1.1	3.4
Total	32.2	41.0	25.8	100.0	25.3	37.9	36.8	100.0

Source: own survey

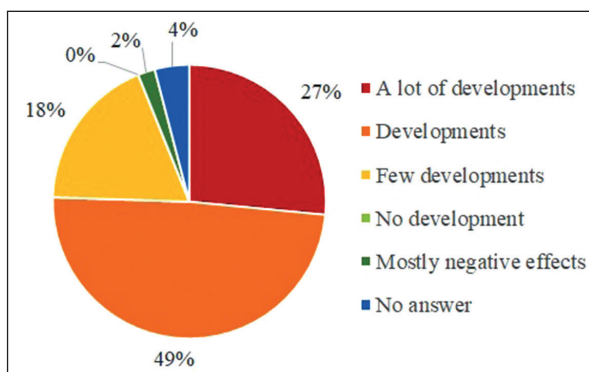


Figure 6

Opinion of respondents with secondary school certificate about regeneration

Source: own survey

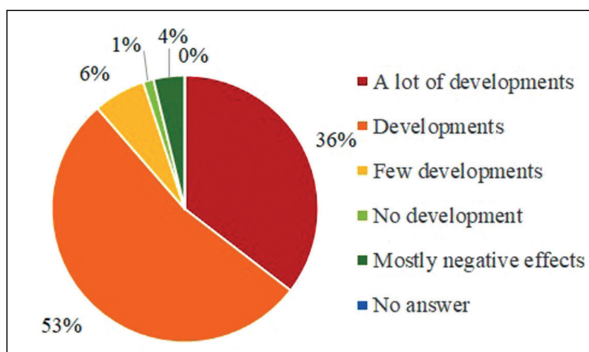


Figure 7

Opinion of respondents with university/college degree about regeneration

Source: own survey



The analysis of answers in view of respondents' sex or schooling indicates that, in spite of diverse problems, the regeneration of the city centre has a massive social support in Debrecen.

The third group of questions aimed at finding a connection between the regeneration of the centre and potential moving out. We established a direct relationship between the successful city regeneration and residents' intention to move. The intention to leave the area is influenced by the positive or negative relation to the city centre.

The most important finding is that city centre residents strongly hold onto their homes and their familiar surroundings (Fig. 8). Although it is true to all age-groups, the intent to move can be mainly seen among the youngest, and it might be natural. As Figure 8 shows, people over 60 do not want to move out from the city centre at all. Furthermore, many of them said that they did not want to leave their home at all! (This was also said by respondents living in blocks of flats that have not seen any renovation or modernisation for ages.)

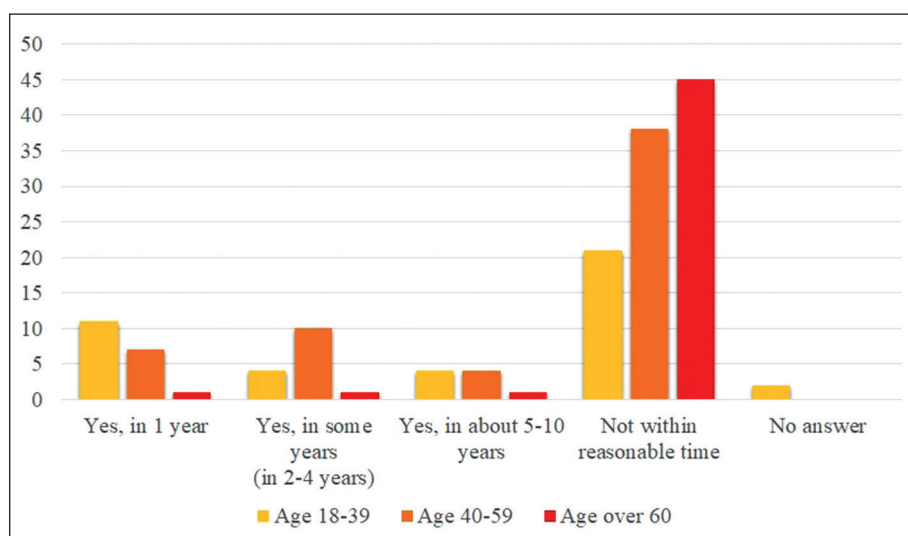


Figure 8
Respondents' potential moving intention and its predictable time
Source: own survey

Dissatisfaction with mainly the condition or size of flats was the first (38%) among the reasons for possible moving (Fig. 9). Primarily flat owners who live in older houses in need of modernisation were dissatisfied with conditions. The high rate of 'other reasons' (22%) needs some further explanation. Behind choosing this answer there might be some intention to move, but it is difficult to express



and sometimes it has not been seriously considered yet. It might be connected to family reasons or the difficulty of changing jobs, or some other issues in the background. 'Family reasons' were mentioned by many respondents as well (21%). In contrast, the surroundings as the reason for a possible move was only marked by 6% of respondents. The fact that people living in the inner quarters are fundamentally satisfied with both the condition of their surroundings and the renewal of the city centre may explain this finding.

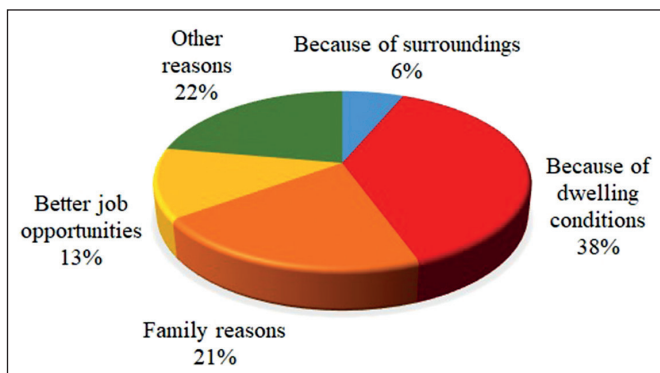


Figure 9
Respondents' reasons for moving out
Source: own survey

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this questionnaire survey was to collect information about residents' opinion on the renewal of the city centre in Debrecen.

Respondents could choose from not only the positive but negative factors as well, and they ranked the sections of the city regeneration project in accordance with their personal experience. Beside similarities, respondents had varied opinion on areas to be developed and, in many cases, they also mentioned various positive and negative factors in connection with their surroundings.

The data collected for this study also confirms our hypothesis that the condition of the dwelling place and its surroundings play a vital role in residents' opinion on regeneration. We saw that people with diverse housing conditions in various surroundings experience the renewal of the city centre differently. In general, residents appreciated the developments and they also marked areas in need of development. Naturally, respondents' points of view on the necessity of development in different areas, sometimes even within the same household, may vary. We found that these differences sometimes originate in respondents' diverse demands.



During the survey we observed that age and schooling also influence the choice of areas to be developed. The survey also proved that men and women's opinion may differ on the effect of city regeneration.

Although respondents often had distinctive opinions on the effects of city centre regeneration, they all considered the changes fundamentally positive. We may conclude that the majority of respondents appreciate the development of the city centre of Debrecen and since they like living in this part of the city they do not want to move.

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