

THE MEANING AND USE OF OPEN SPACES IN HOUSING AREAS: RESIDENTS' RESPONSES IN NORTHERN CYPRUS

Dr. Derya Oktay
Associate Professor,
Eastern Mediterranean University,
Faculty of Architecture,
Gazimagusa, Northern Cyprus,
Mersin 10, Turkey

ABSTRACT

In this study an attempt to explore the meaning of open spaces in housing areas of Northern Cyprus has been made and these spaces have been evaluated in terms of adequacy for use by the residents.

A survey conducted on 420 residents from various areas, having people belonging to different age groups and income levels, helped in finding out the extent to which the exterior environment means to them and how they integrate it with their lives. The findings revealed a high level of desire for better integration between the residences and the open spaces around them. However, in many cases due to the poor quality of design, which lacks a sensitivity towards social and cultural values, a majority of residents showed disappointment concerning these spaces. The questionnaire designed for this specific survey comprised of questions regarding general satisfaction of the users with the open spaces, their location, size and design, their relationship with the house and the street, the quality of the greenery, provision for car parking, etc.

While studying the significance of open spaces, this paper focuses on the most common housing patterns in Northern Cyprus, considering the

changing qualities of residential development in the last decade.

1. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

It is a general observation that the methods employed in designing housing projects usually take the user requirements into consideration only at the scale of the dwelling unit, whereas this consideration is completely neglected while planning the open spaces. In fact, open spaces around dwellings have great importance both, in creating and/or enhancing social interaction among residents and enriching the daily life in individual units - especially in the case of hot climates. Furthermore, as Marcus and Sarkissian (1986) have also highlighted in their comprehensive study on clustered housing, the success of housing depends more on how the spaces between buildings are handled rather than on interior design.

Through previous researches (Oktay & Onal 1996), it has already been established that residential exterior spaces lack responsiveness to their users' needs, their life style and their socio-cultural conditions.

Preliminary observations have also revealed that a number of problems are experienced by the residents of housing areas in Northern Cyprus, regarding the physical layout of open spaces and their general living environment. This is especially true in the case of multi-storey housing developments which contradict many social and cultural norms in Cypriot towns.¹

Since very little baseline data exists, regarding the preferences and attitudes of people about 'residential open spaces' in Cypriot towns, for this research paper the first aim was to develop an understanding how these spaces effect their users. In order to generate substantial data, a survey was conducted using a specifically formatted questionnaire designed by keeping in view several observations and preconceptions concerning the meaning and use of private and semi-private spaces.²

The survey was directed in such a way that it analysed the responses of residents from different housing types. Basic themes in the survey forms were regarding 'general characteristics of the residents and their houses', 'perceptions and evaluations regarding private and semi-private open spaces and their expectations' and 'evaluations of the surrounding environment'.

Various districts in the three towns, Lefkosa (Nicosia), Gazimagusa (Famagusta) and Grine (Kyrenia) were studied for this paper. Only the most common housing patterns, i.e. the individual/detached or row houses and apartment flats were considered. 270 out of 420 dwelling units were individual houses and 150 were apartment flats.

Although the areas selected for study had varying socio-economic level, but this distinction was not significant, thus not reflected in the evaluations. Generally the residents were of moderate income level, from various areas and age groups. The distinction between different housing types was treated as significant. However, evaluations were done both in general terms as well as separately for each group of housing type.

2. SOCIO-ECONOMIC OVERVIEW OF STUDY AREAS

2.1 Apartments

The survey carried out reveals that a majority of residents in apartments live there on a rental basis. Only 36% of the surveyed apartments had owners living in them. Almost 90% of the residents have lived in their apartments between one to five years only (48% between 2 to 5 years and 50% between 1 to 2 years), whereas only 1/10 of the households have lived there for longer period. Almost half of flat residents previously lived in detached houses (Figure #1).

The apartment residents mostly fall within the age group of 18-40 years. Residents of beyond 40 years were very rare. A vast majority was within 18-25 years of age (Figure #2).

The average size of a household in apartments varies between 2 to 4 persons per family. However, 16% houses had five persons and 4% had only one person (Figure #3).

TYPE OF PREVIOUS HOUSING

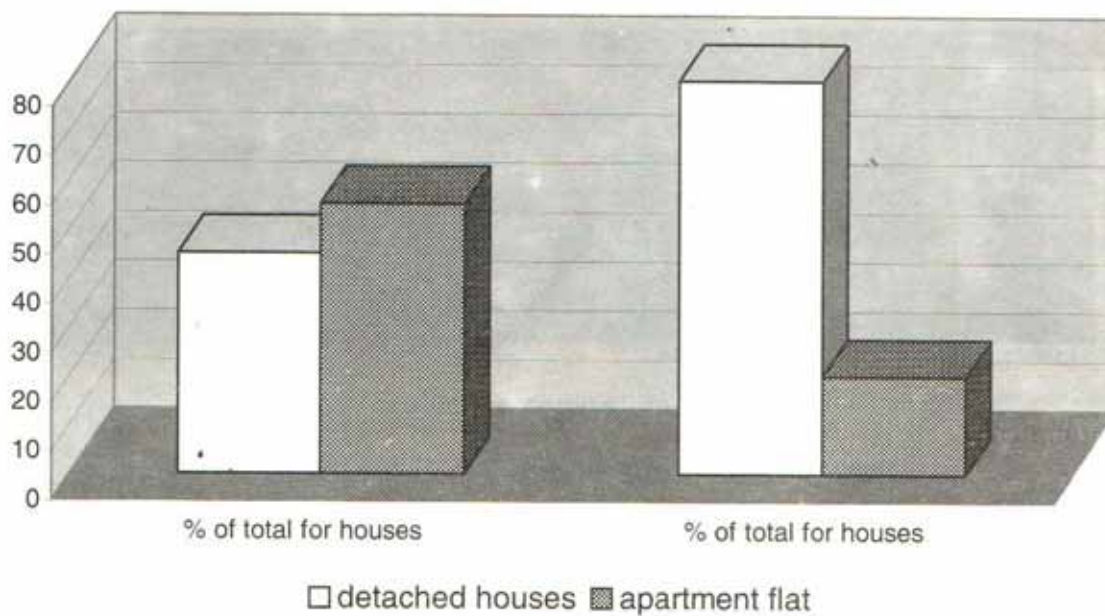


Figure #1: Types of Previous Housing

AGES OF RESPONDENTS

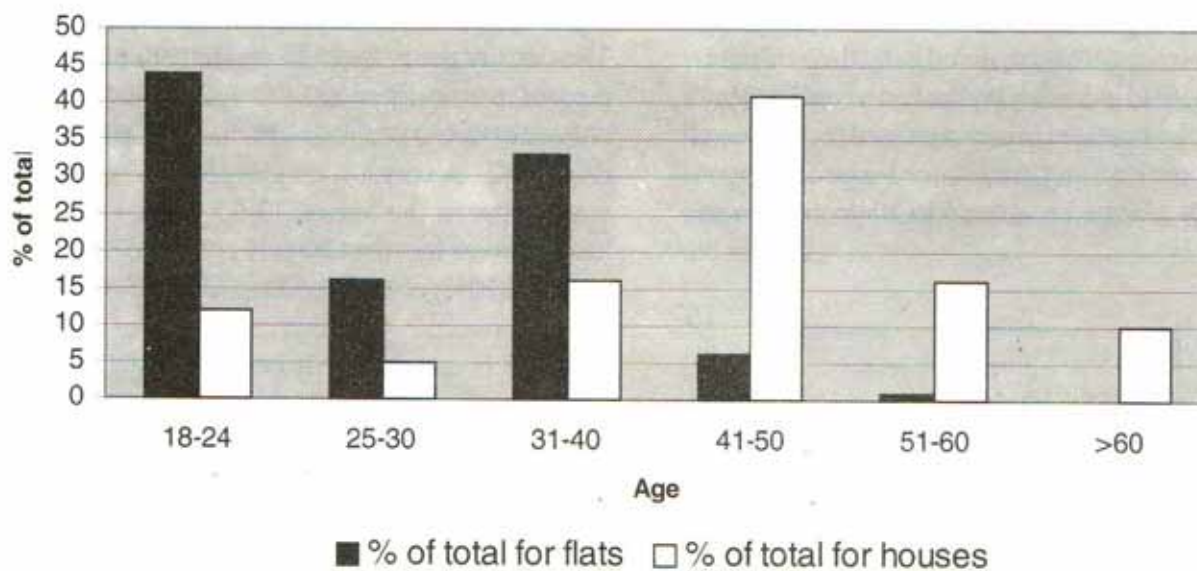


Figure #2: Ages of Respondents

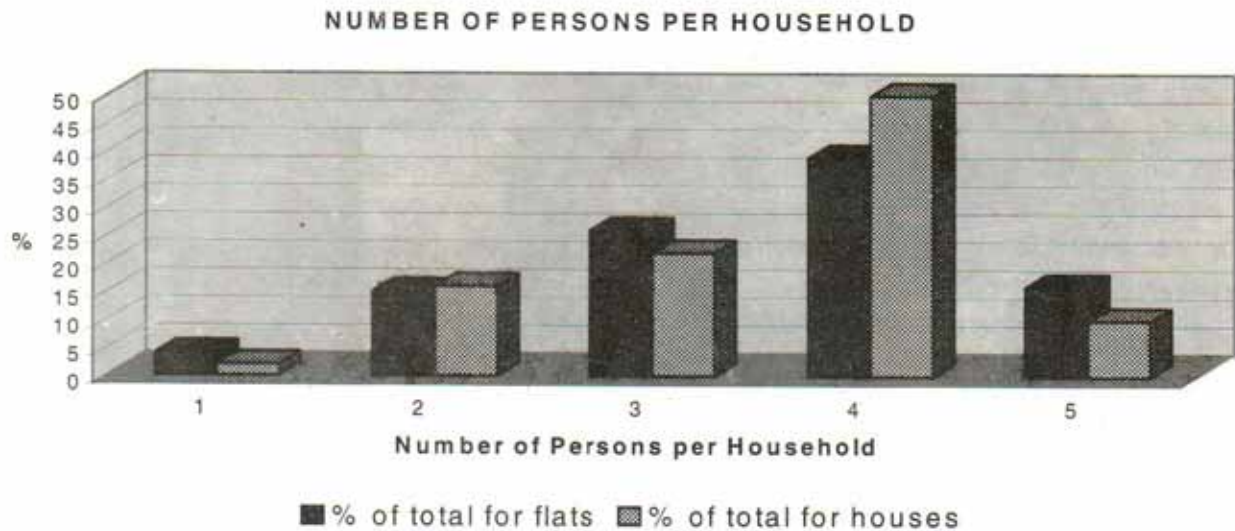


Figure #3: Number of Persons per Household

2.2 Individual Houses

In the case of individual houses, a large majority of residences are being lived in by their owners. Only 15% of individual houses had tenants in them. It can also be stated here that most of the residents have been residing in the same house for longer periods of time i.e. since 5 to 20 years or even more.

0.8%	2 years or less
14%	2-5 years
28%	5-10 years
25%	10-20 years
25%	more than 20 years

Majority of the residents were between the age of 30-60 years. Only a handful were less than 30 years (17%) or above 60 years (10%) of age. The density per household varied between 2-4 persons in majority of cases. Only 2% houses had only one person whereas 10% had five persons (Figure #2). A very low majority of the residents were between the age of 30-60 years. Only a handful were less than 30 years (17%) or above 60 years (10%) of age. The density per household varied between 2-4 persons in majority of cases. Only 2% houses had only one person whereas 10% have five persons (Figure #3). A very low percentage of households presently living in individual houses had previously resided in apartments/ flats.

3. HOUSING FORM IN NORTHERN CYPRUS AND THEIR OPEN SPACES

The traditional building form in the older parts of Northern Cyprus is the low row-house with a porch and a small front yard facing the access street and a private outdoor backyard (avlu/ courtyard) behind the house. This form of dwelling with both front-yard and back-yard provides a valuable freedom of choice between staying on the public side of the house or on the private side.

Therefore, it is quite normal that the responses of the flat residents in the survey were more negative compared to those of the house residents, as multi-storey housing is a new phenomena in Northern Cyprus and the current examples of these generally lack the possibilities that are provided by individual houses specially in terms of open spaces and recreational areas

Thus the response of flat residents regarding their open spaces was mostly negative as compared to the house residents. More than half of the flat respondents (57%) were not happy with the open and semi-open spaces in apartments. Whereas in the case of individual houses 64% residents were happy and only 1/3 were not happy with the open spaces provided for them.

The various forms of open and semi-open spaces identified in patterns of Northern Cyprus include;

- Gardens
- Balconies
- Car parking
- Common open spaces

The importance of these open and semi open spaces in the lives of Cypriots can be evaluated from the fact that the judgement of more than half

of the respondents about their dwellings' quality was influenced by the character of the open spaces provided with them. About 68% of people showed their dis-satisfaction if their balconies or gardens were provided with the possibility of use for only an aesthetically pleasing view. They preferred multi functionality in these spaces. However, 32% of people showed satisfaction even if these spaces had single use.

75% of individual house residents were of the opinion that the open and semi-open spaces of their houses effected the overall aesthetic quality. In the case of apartment residents only 31% thought that open spaces play an important role in the overall aesthetics of their living environment (Figure #4).

24% of the respondents were dissatisfied with the relationship between their outdoor and indoor spaces. On the other hand, most respondents (74%) were pleased with the relationship between their outdoor spaces and the street. Regarding privacy, most residents (60%) did not complain about being exposed to the eyes of passers-by while sitting in their gardens or balconies; only two-thirds (40%) considered it a problem. In line with these considerations, most residents (76%) showed a preference to watch the activities or passers-by in the street and about a quarter (24%) did not.

3.1 Gardens

"Architects must design gardens as much as they design buildings to be able to develop an understanding of aesthetics, to acquire mystic values and to learn how to enjoy them"

Luis Barragan

INFLUENCE OF OPEN SPACES ON THE GENERAL JUDGEMENT

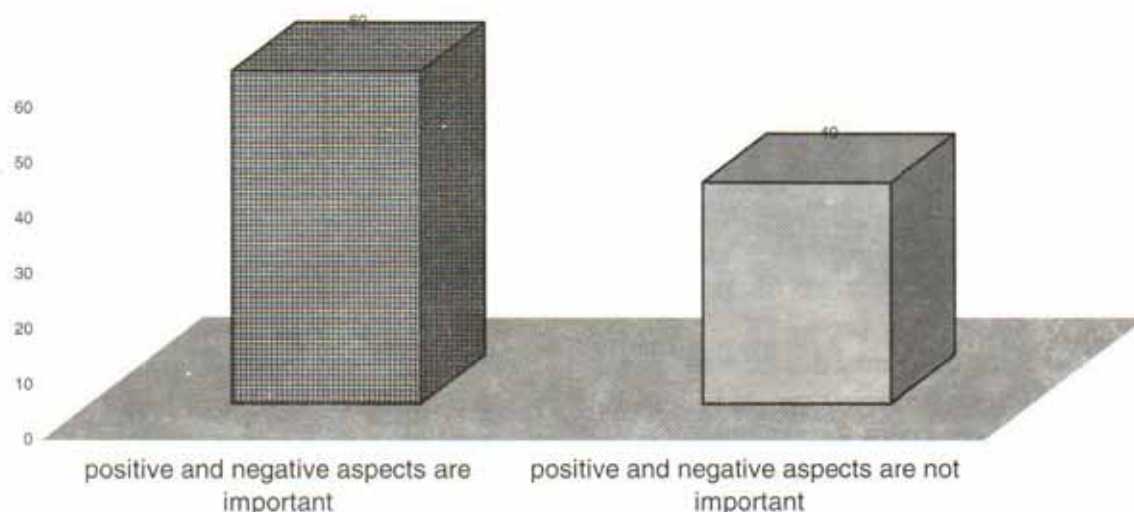


Figure #4: Influence of open spaces on the general judgment

As this feature is found only in individual houses the apartment users were not considered for the evaluations regarding gardens. The front gardens in individual houses are used for many functions such as growing flowers, sitting, car parking, circulation passage, receiving guests, etc.

Among these growing plants is the most common function. A majority of the residents (72%) use their front gardens for this purpose; summer sitting is the second activity that most people prefer (64%). More than one-fourth of users (29%) use this space for sitting through nine months.

Other less common uses include car parking (22%), only as passage (20%), for receiving guests (17%) and growing vegetables (6%).

All residents mentioned similar problems regarding their front gardens, i.e. they are small in

size, their solar orientation is not suitable, they do not provide privacy and they are too exposed to street noise. Almost (22%) of residents complained about the inefficient solar orientation, slightly less than one-fifth (18%) complained about the street noise, and less than one-fifth (17%) complained about the small size of their front gardens.

The use of residents in individual houses was quite different as compared to those of front gardens. More than half of them (52%) use their rear gardens for drying laundry, slightly less than half (48%) for growing flowers, more than one-third (36%) for growing vegetables, almost one-fifth (19%) use them for storage, slightly less than one-fifth (18%) to keep pets, less than one-fifth (18%) to sit, and less than one-fifth (17%) for other types of household chores.

3.2 Balconies

This feature is found both in apartments as well as individual houses. Balconies can be an important and valued amenity for some individuals, they provide a psychological outlet in addition to being a functional space (for growing flowers, sitting, eating, etc). Thus they are essential in many contexts.

Balconies came out to be the most disappointing elements of today's housing. Generally, the individual house residents were more satisfied with their balconies as compared to the apartment users.

The basic complaint of the users about their balcony was regarding its size, solar orientation, privacy and street noise. In the case of flat residents 66% complained about the small size of the balcony, 36% complained about its inefficient solar orientation, 23% were of the opinion that they had a lack of privacy and 14% considered the street noise as a problem.

Whereas, in the case of individual houses only 30% residents complained about the small size of their balconies, 20% had problem due to inefficient solar orientation and 22% of the residents complained about the disturbance due to street noise.

In both housing type the balconies were being used for a variety of functions such as sitting, receiving guests, drying laundry, watching television, etc.

In the case of apartments half of the residents use their balconies for sitting throughout the year, and one-third (55%) for the summer time only. More than one-fifth (23%) use them to dry clothes; slightly less than one-fifth (17%) to receive guests, and almost one-third (32%) to watch TV.

A large majority of the flat residents (89%) were disappointed by the lack of opportunity to grow plants on their balconies; only a handful (11%) were pleased with the situation.

On the other hand, 42% of the house residents used their balconies during the summer, around 35% for sitting throughout the year, about 29% to dry clothes, and only 21% to receive guests.

Due to the earlier mentioned reasons of dissatisfaction, the residents of both types of housing made some changes in their balconies. About 10% of the flat residents and 7% of the individual house residents changed the railings of their balconies.³ 15% of the flat residents and 5% of the house residents introduced sun screen elements (canopies, etc.) Regarding the floor pavement, 12% of the flat residents as well as individual house residents changed the floor finish (Figure #5).

3.3 Car Parking

The percentage of car ownership is quite different for flat residents and individual house residents. Most flat residents (64%) have one car for each unit; only a handful (12%) have two cars; and very few (7%), probably students' shared flats, have three cars. On the other hand, in individual houses, slightly less than half (43%) of the residents have one car, a similar number of residents (43%) have two cars, and a tenth (10%) have three cars.

Users satisfaction about spaces for car parking also differs from one group to the other. Less than two-fifths of the apartment residents (40%) were pleased with the existing situation, but more than half (60%) were not.

In private houses, more than half (65%) were pleased with the car parking facilities; over one-third (35%) were not. A large majority (83%) of

THINGS THAT THE RESIDENTS CHANGED IN THEIR BALCONIES

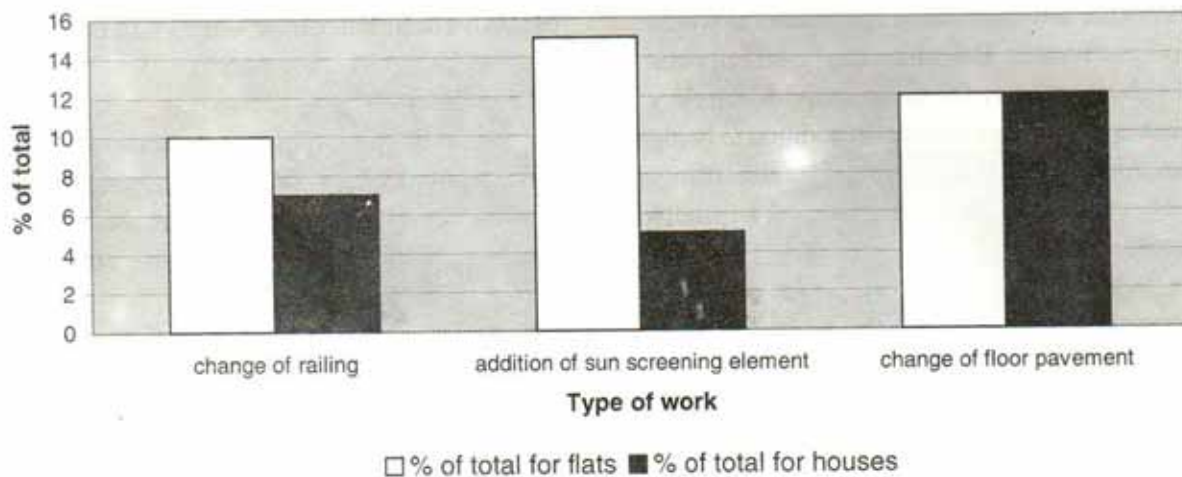


Figure #5: The things which the residents changed in their

the individual house residents would like to have their cars near to their houses; only a handful (8%) would prefer a group car parking in a nearby location.

Almost 71% of the flat residents showed a desire to have their car parking spaces adjacent to or near to their apartment; while only 28% preferred them as a group car parking far from their apartments.

Regarding guests' parking, most residents (65%) complained about the lack of facilities provided for their guests, while slightly more than one-third (35%) did not consider this as a problem.

3.4 Common Open Spaces

Open green spaces in and around cities are important for a number of reasons. These include the function of soil and its vegetation as a carbon sink; the function of the tree cover as an 'atmospheric scrubber' removing particulate pollution of green areas as protectors of flora and fauna and the maintenance of bio-diversity.

In addition to these environmental functions, the green areas are used for recreation, food production and economic tree cropping.

Considering various characteristics of common spaces, residents of both types of houses expressed the same level of satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

A large majority (89%) of the residents were not pleased with the provision of common spaces and related settings. The types of common spaces which the residents showed a desire to make use of, include passive green areas (72%), sports areas (63%), common space for young people (62%) and children's play grounds (32%).

Almost one-third of the residents complained about the street noise in the common spaces, more than a quarter (27%) mentioned about their inappropriate location, more than a quarter (26%) complained about the lack of view provided through them and one-fifth (20%) stated that their visual boundaries were not clear.

Most residents (65%) were disappointed with their neighbors' concern about the cleaning of common spaces. Considering the general environment, most of the people (61%) were dissatisfied with the maintenance of the surrounding environment; the points of dissatisfaction included poor refuse collection, pavement decay in the street, clutter of electrical wires, etc.

More than half of the residents (53%) complained about inefficient street-lighting, and most residents (71%) complained about the lack of side walks in their neighborhood.⁴ On the other hand, a large majority of the respondents (89%) were unhappy with the lack of greenery in their environment.

CONCLUSION

It is established through this study that open spaces are a cornerstone in the daily life of the people in Northern Cyprus and satisfaction with their dwellings greatly depends on the quality of private and semi-private open spaces provided with them. However, at the present state, these spaces lack the qualities which provide positive meaning and availability for use by the residents; furthermore, there is a serious user dissatisfaction with the provision and/or qualities of collective open spaces in housing areas.

It appears that the meaning and use of open spaces is quite different between the two types of housing; i.e. apartments and individual house. The differences are not only due to the building type, but also due to the characteristic of the residents (their ages, house ownership, duration of residence, etc.).

In general the level of satisfaction is lower for apartment type housing, where private open

spaces, usually in the form of balconies, are far from being an extension of the living environment. Efficiently designed - well proportioned, well climatized, well ornamented - open spaces that are appropriate for sitting, eating, receiving guests, drying laundry, watching TV, etc. are fundamental to the success of apartment living. Maintenance of the semi-private open spaces and their surrounding environment is another issue which affects people's satisfaction with their dwellings. Therefore, these spaces must be considered early in the design process in terms of location, greenery, visual boundaries, view, protection against the weather elements such as rain, sun, etc.

The residents of individual houses also had many problems with their private open spaces. These include inefficient solar orientation, street noise, insufficient size, lack of privacy, etc. Findings indicate that the front gardens play a very important role in the lives of people and are preferred by many for various activities. This confirms that despite the theoretical possibility of making all sides of dwellings equally important, Cypriot culture retains a strong sense of 'front and back'. Therefore, for the success of the outdoor living, front yards must be carefully considered in relation to their widths and depths so that the necessary climatic advantages can be achieved.

Thus, the experiences of residents in Northern Cyprus demonstrates the negative impact that poorly-designed open spaces can have on the quality of people's lives.

NOTE: This article was presented as a paper at ITU/IAPS Symposium: 'Culture & Space in the Home Environment', held in Istanbul, between 4 and 7 June 1997.

REFERENCES

- Atasoy, A., Ulusu, T. (1989)** "Konut Yakyn Cevresi Acyk Alanlaryn Kalite Sorunlary": Kamu Mekanlari Tasarimi ve Kent Mobilyalari Sempozyumu : *Proceedings, MSU, Istanbul.*
- Bapkaya, A.A., Symes, M. (1994)** " A Study of a House Type With An Open Space" *Proceedings of CARDO People - Place - Development Symposium, New Castle upon Tyne, pp. 142-154.*
- Carstens, D. Y. (1990)** 'Housing and Outdoor Spaces for the Elderly', *People Places*, ed. C.C. Marcus, C. Francis, Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York, pp. 171-210.
- Cranz, G. (1987)** "Evaluating the Physical Environment : Conclusions from Eight Housing Projects", *Housing the Aged : Design Directives and Policy Considerations*, ed. V. Regnier, J. Pynoos, Elsevier, New York, pp. 81-104.
- Dokmeci, V., Yurekly, H., Caddai, G., Akkal, L. B. (1995)** "Istanbul Metropolitan Alanynda Konut Nitelioinin Belirlenmesi", *Mimari ve Kentsel Cevrede Kalite Arayislari Sempozyumu : Proceedings, ITU, Istanbul, pp. 184-191.*
- Edwards. E. (1996)** *Towards Sustainable Architecture*, Butterworth Architecture, Oxford.
- Gur, P.O. (1995)** "Fizksel Cevre Tasarymynda Kalite Yle Ylgili Paradigmalar", *Mimari ve Kentsel Cevrede Aalite Arayisari Sempozyumu : Proceedings, ITU, Istanbul, pp. 274-255.*
- Ymamodlu, V. (1993)** "Ynsan, Evi ve Cevresi Araptyrma Projesi : Mimari Easy Gozlemler", T. C. Basbakanlik TKI Konut Arastirmalari Sempozyumu : *Proceedings, pp. 339-355.*
- Uraz, T.U., Yncedolu, M., Paker, N. (1995)** "Konut Yakyn Cevresi Acyk Alan Tasarymynda Nitelik Eoyutunun Yrdelenmesi", *Mimari ve Kentsel Cevrede Kalite Arayislari Sempozyumu : Proceedings, ITU, Istanbul, pp. 122-128.*
- Lawrence, R. (1987)** "Housing, Dwellings and Homes : Design Theory, Research and Practice": John Wiley & Sons, London.
- Marcus, C.C., Sarkissian, W. (1986)** "Housing As If People Mattered": University of California Press, Berkeley, California.
- Moughtin, C. (1996)** "Urban Design: Green Dimensions": Butterworth Architecture, Oxford.
- Oktay, D., Onal. I. (1996)** "A Social-Spatial Review of Exterior Spaces in Residential Environments in North Cyprus": *Proceedings of XXIV. IAHS World Housing Congress, Ankara, pp. 117-1199.*

Ozsoy, A. (1995) "Toplue Konutlarda Kalite ve Surdurulebilirlioi": Mimari ve Kentsel Cevrede Kalite Arayislari Sempozyumu: Proceedings, ITU, Istanbul, pp. 208-215.

Seamon, D., Mugeraver, R. (1985) "Dwelling, Place and Environment : Towards A Phenomenology of Person and World": Martinus Nijhoff Pub., Boston.

-
- ¹ It has been only ten years since multi-storey housing was comprehensively introduced in Northern Cyprus.
 - ² Post-occupancy evaluations of housing environments are providing architects with insightful glimpses as to how their buildings are being used, valued adjusted, and modified by tenants and management. Therefore, most of the design research in many countries takes the user surveys as the basis. In the present paper, SPSS programme has been used in the evaluation of the survey data.
 - ³ Changes on railings were mostly related with their height, which blocked the residents' view and negatively affected the visual interaction between the balcony and the outer environment.
 - ⁴ This was such a serious problem that some residents in Kara Kol, a newly developed district in Gazimagusa (Famagusta) where the average income level is high, built the sidewalks in their areas themselves.