Abstract: When a city in a peripheral location has shrunk dramatically over recent decades, what potential does it have to keep or attract residents over the long term? Could testing life in new locations for a limited period help identify urban strengths and weaknesses, which can then be exploited for future development? The ‘Probewohnen – Trial residencies’ project gave interested persons the chance to experience daily life in the historic centre of the German city of Görlitz for a week. Scientific surveys provided information on the expectations and experiences of the project participants. The results show that third-tier cities with good infrastructure and a historic building stock have great potentials as future residential hubs.

1 Introduction

Many third-tier cities in peripheral locations have faced severe demographic decline over recent decades. High vacancy rates of residential and commercial buildings in historic towns is currently a problem for many third-tier cities throughout Germany, not merely in the east (BBSR 2017b: 12f). Besides the loss of urban functions, this means a threat to the urban fabric, in historic cities in particular.

Strategies against these trends are manifold. In the course of massive population growth in many large cities and urban agglomerations, many third-tier cities have seen a stagnating or slightly rising population, particularly in the periphery. Thus, from an urban development policy perspective, the following questions become relevant: Are these cities expecting a “renaissance”? Taking into account a negative natural population trend, in-migration is an important factor when answering this question. So, for whom are such cities attractive?

In the following, we will shed light on definitions and characteristics of third-tier cities in order to deduce assumptions on possible assets for newcomers. We will then take a look at Görlitz, a third-tier city of around 57,000 inhabitants located in Eastern Germany. Situated directly on the Polish border, the city is known for its outstanding ensemble of historic buildings. However, as a third-tier city lying in the periphery, Görlitz has also been hit by demographic and economic change, forcing the local authorities to develop new strategies to deal with vacant housing stock and retail units in the inner city. Non-residents are given the opportunity to test city life for a limited period. With the innovative ‘Probewohnen – Trial residencies’ project, the local housing association and urban development actors have attempted to achieve two goals: Firstly, to draw attention to the quality of life in the city of Görlitz and, secondly, to gain insights into the needs of potential incomers in order to suitably adapt the housing stock and further improve the living environment. From a scientific perspective, the aim of the project was to gain transferrable findings on the potentials and constraints of urban development in third-tier cities, undergoing substantial demographic and socio-economic changes.

We will explain the project, highlight some results of the survey of trial residents, draw conclusion and point out the perspective of an ongoing follow-up project: ‘Testing the city’.

2 Third-tier cities: attractive for whom? – The conceptual framework

To conceptualise the following case study analysis, we would like to address the following questions: What is a third-tier city? Is there anything special about them and what is the relevance of this category? Which population groups find these cities attractive (or unattractive)?

2.1 Concepts and definitions

When discussing concepts such as ‘medium-sized cities’ or ‘third-tier cities’, it is important to point out that there are no universal definitions, but rather national and regional classifications of these to distinguish them from main urban centres. While Bolton and Hildreth provide a definition of ‘mid-sized cities’ in England as having a population of between 50,000
and 200,000, the OECD defines cities with less than 100,000 inhabitants as ‘small’ and those above this figure as ‘medium-sized’ (Bolton, Hildreth 2013; Dijkstra, Poelman 2012). In Germany, medium-sized cities are defined as towns and cities with 20,000 to 100,000 inhabitants; further, there is a distinction made between ‘big’ or ‘small’ third-tier cities with more or fewer than 50,000 inhabitants respectively (BBSR 2017). The German Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR) has, furthermore, delivered a definition that divides cities into three different types: large cities, medium-sized cities and small-sized towns. The distinction between the three city types was made based on their number of inhabitants and their role in supplying the surrounding countryside (BBSR 2020).

2.2 Characteristics of third-tier cities

Increasingly, however, such distinctions based on population figures alone are considered insufficient, as similarly sized cities may in fact encompass a range of highly heterogeneous urban forms and types. Instead, various other criteria and characteristics of third-tier cities are being promoted. One generally accepted distinction relates to the general location of a city, e.g. near a metropolitan region or in a rural area. Further distinguishing criteria are lower population density, urban structure and development dynamics, the awarding of city rights and accessibility and commuter flows into the city (Adam 2005, Baumgart, Rüdiger 2010, BBSR 2012). Brabazon distinguishes ‘second-tier cities’ from ‘third-tier cities’ based on population as well as the functional characteristics of the latter, such as poor infrastructure, few company headquarters, a lack of policy support, influence, branding, and image. As an example, she defines two British cities with similar populations but different functional assets, namely Brighton and Aberdeen, as second-tier and third-tier respectively (Brabazon 2015).

However, the specifics of third-tier cities differ, depending on their location and economic and demographic structure. The city of Görlitz, which we take a closer look at in this paper, is located peripherally, economically relatively underdeveloped and marked by demographic difficulties.

In the future, third-tier cities are likely to face considerable social and economic challenges. With weak economic structures, which are partly a result of the Global Financial Crisis, they are unable to exploit economies of scale. Third-tier cities are also struggling to maintain infrastructure such as that required for education and health (Brabazon 2017). The widespread digital transformation of retail, banking and commerce means that many urban activities are disappearing, with main shopping streets suffering the most (de Carvalho & van Winden 2017). On the other hand, a higher quality of life is often attributed to third-tier cities. They possess a number of advantages, such as short travelling distances within the city (which ensures physical as well as social proximity), high-quality residential conditions as well green surroundings (Flacke 2004: 30, Schmidt-Lauber 2010: 24).

However, the digital transformation might improve the life of residents in third-tier cities: Wireless environments enable teleworking and e-commerce, and when private and public services leave, these can be replaced to some degree by online services. Furthermore, digitalisation opens up many new business opportunities and can create new jobs. This process can be seen in many cities which have become hubs of digital-related businesses, not only attracting large companies but increasingly also innovative startups that are exploring new niche markets in the digital economy (Bell, Jayne 2009: 693). At the same time, there is no doubt that big cities and second-tier cities with their broad pool of skilled workers have benefited most from the wave of startups as well as from new investments in other industries that increasingly need ICT skills (Brabazon 2017; de Carvalho & van Winden 2017).

2.3 Assumptions for the case study

We have shown that the debate on third-tier cities is manifold and that many concepts and definitions exist. This requires a clear distinction when discussing cases of third-tier cities. Furthermore, third-tier cities are not a homogeneous class at all, but are subject to the influence of external context conditions, such as geographical location, demographic trends, socio-economic situation, and technical innovations. However, many third-tier cities face similar challenges and compete with bigger cities and urban agglomerations for investments and people. This is true for cities in peripheral locations in particular.

Thus, these cities seem to be standing at a crossroads concerning their future development, facing difficult demographic socio-economic context conditions as well as uncertainties concerning digitalisation, etc. The most
important factor is the demographic trend, as this determines many other aspects. As the natural demographic trend is negative, these cities are reliant upon in-migration. The main hypotheses for the following case study analysis are, therefore: 1) Third-tier cities are attractive (and unattractive) for specific population groups as newcomers. 2) To some extent, locational advantages in third-tier cities can compensate for locational disadvantages compared to large cities and agglomerations.

3 The case of Görlitz

In the following, we will introduce the case of the city of Görlitz. There, the advantages and disadvantages distinctive for many third-tier cities in peripheral locations are evident. Additionally, Görlitz is understood here as a real-world laboratory, supported by a research facility based there, where transdisciplinary research designs can be implemented. Particularly, experimental formats can easily be developed with collaboration partners who share the same interests. We will introduce the city with its context conditions and explain the ‘Probewohnen – Trial residencies’ project, which provided insights into requirements and the real-world experience of in-migration to Görlitz.

3.1 Population trends and the changing labour market in Görlitz

The population of Görlitz increased rapidly in the 19th century as a result of Germany’s path to industrialisation. In the 1920s, it stabilised at over 90,000 inhabitants. After World War II, when the city became a transit station or place of arrival for refugees and displaced persons, the population increased in the short term to more than 100,000 inhabitants (Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe 2016).

In the early years of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), after the city was divided along the border to Poland, the population was once again around 90,000. From the 1950s, however, Görlitz has seen its population fall due to out-migration and low birth rates. The population increased in the short term to more than 100,000 inhabitants (Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe 2016).

In October 2019, the city had a population of around 57,000 (Stadt Görlitz 2019: 3). Similarly to many cities in Eastern Germany, the share of the workforce employed in secondary industries also decreased sharply in Görlitz after 1990. At the same time, the service sector increased in importance. However, due to widespread job losses, the ratio of employees in the tertiary sector is lower than that of comparable cities in Western Germany (Stadt Görlitz 2012: 4f). In October 2019, the unemployment rate in the city was about 13 per cent (Stadt Görlitz 2019: 7). Despite the high unemployment rate, a shortage of skilled workers has already been identified as a problem by regional companies as well as education and research facilities. Under current demographic trends, there is soon likely to be an insufficient number of young professionals to fill vacancies in various sectors (Landkreis Görlitz 2016: 4f).

3.2 The historic town of Görlitz

Spared from the devastation that befell many other cities in World War II, Görlitz has one of the best-preserved historic city centres in Central Europe. With nearly 40,000 listed heritage monuments and buildings, the inner city features an outstanding ensemble of historic urban structures from the Renaissance and Baroque periods. The city centre is framed by urban structures from the so-called Gründerzeit period (neighbourhoods in Wilhelminian style from the end of the 19th century). As in many East German cities, Görlitz neglected its historic inner-city building stock during the GDR era, instead focusing on the construction of large housing estates on the city outskirts. The dilapidation of buildings in inner cities continued for decades, prompting many inhabitants to move to new and better-equipped apartments outside the city centre. Due to a lack of maintenance and care, many buildings in the historic inner cities had become uninhabitable at the time of the reunification in 1990. In Görlitz, large prefabricated estates were constructed in order to provide the population with sufficient housing. The more recent urban expansion to the north was completed in
the 1980s – at a time when the city was already suffering considerable population loss (Stadt Görlitz 2009: 9).

After Germany’s reunification, attention turned to the historic core of Görlitz, where the vacancy rate was about 90 per cent. Enormous progress has been made over the subsequent 25 years to revitalise the inner city through urban development measures funded by programmes for urban renewal and urban heritage by the federal government and federal states as well as a great deal of private and municipal support. Three-quarters of the buildings in the historic town have been retrofitted since 1990. Thanks to the high standards and requirements imposed by the preservation authorities, it has been possible to realise the high-quality restoration of historic buildings that are so valued today. The vacant retail and residential space available at the turn of the millennium has undergone something of a renaissance, while the inner city has been increasingly rediscovered as a residential district as well as a great location for hotels and restaurants.

The current vacancy rate of below 30 per cent in the inner city represents a considerable success in view of the massive number of empty buildings after 1990. Nevertheless, the vacancy rate in the historic town is still higher than in the city as a whole. At the same time, the historic core can be called the ‘youngest’ district of Görlitz: The average age of its local population is only 38 years. While having attracted an influx of retirees in recent years, the inner city has also been a magnet for younger immigrants and families (Stadt Görlitz 2009: 7). Due to the ongoing reconstruction work and the relocation of industries away from the city centre, demand for housing in the historic town has steadily increased (Stadt Görlitz 2002: 13). As a reaction to this, efforts are also being made to improve the local environment through measures such as courtyard improvement, the creation of green spaces and improvement of the public spaces, streets and pavements in the inner city.

4 The ‘Probewohnen – Trial residencies’ project in Görlitz

4.1 Objectives of the project

The purpose of the ‘Probewohnen – Trial residencies’ project was to give interested people the chance to live in the historic heart of Görlitz for a test week. The participants were viewed as ‘experts’ charged with assessing the quality of life in the local neighbourhood. At the same time, they had the opportunity to form their personal opinion of living in the historic city centre of a third-tier city through everyday experiences.

On the one hand, the project aimed to encourage people to relocate to Görlitz and to make the city better known as an attractive residential location. On the other hand, knowledge about the requirements of potential citizens regarding Görlitz as a residential location as well as their housing needs was to be provided by means of an accompanying scientific survey. The results of the survey were also intended to provide general information about how to make life in third-tier cities even more attractive.

The project was made possible by KommWohnen Görlitz GmbH, the municipal housing company, which provided the apartments free of charge. The Leibniz Institute of Ecological Urban and Regional Development (IOER) with its Interdisciplinary Centre for Ecological and Revitalising Urban Transformation (IZS) in Görlitz provided scientific support by selecting applicants, conducting the participant survey and evaluating the results.

4.2 Methodology

In the period from September 2015 to October 2016, three furnished apartments in a Baroque residential building located in the historic core were offered to interested parties. The project participants could stay there free of charge for one week. This offer was widely advertised. In the end, 115 households with a total of 227 people were invited to participate in the project and to test life in Görlitz. The selection criteria for the participants from the 365 applicant households were the current place of residence, the household structure and size, age, motivation to participate in the project and relationship to the city of Görlitz. The project initiators aimed to consider applicants who expressed a real desire to move and an interest in the city of Görlitz. Individual explanations of motivations and interests helped to identify people who were interested in the project for reasons other than merely tourism. The selection also aimed to ensure a diverse cross-section of the population and to select people for whom a move to the city or region was a realistic proposal.

The survey of the participants’ expectations and experiences of life in the historic centre of Görlitz was based on standardised questionnaires. During the application procedure, the potential residents were required to complete
the first questionnaire, which asked basic questions about their current place of residence, intention to relocate and relationship to Görlitz. After agreeing to take part in the test week, the participants were given a second questionnaire that was also to be completed before arriving in Görlitz. This dealt, in particular, with their current housing situation as well as their expectations regarding the city and life in the historic centre of Görlitz. During their stay, the participants filled in a third questionnaire, enquiring about their actual experiences of daily life as well as the housing requirements for any possible relocation. A total of 195 adult participants completed the three questionnaires, thereby providing the basic data for the study analysis.

4.3 Project participants

Fifty-eight (married) couples, 20 family households with 38 children, 31 individuals and six households of various composition (such as friends, siblings and colleagues) participated in the project. The average age of the participants was 57. The largest proportion of participants came from Berlin, followed by the federal states of North Rhine-Westphalia, Saxony and Baden-Württemberg. Half of the participants were currently living in a large city when they took part in the project (see Figure 1).

Even during the application stage, it became apparent that there was great interest from residents of large cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. In fact, nearly 70 per cent of applications came from households living in such large cities (by comparison, only about 30 per cent of the overall German population live in large cities). The motivation to participate in the project was often dissatisfaction with their current housing situation due to noise, environmental pollution, heavy traffic or an overpriced and limited supply of property. Not surprisingly, many applicants were either retired or nearing retirement. In this life phase, many people consider relocating in order to choose a place of residence that better suits their individual needs in retirement, regardless of their professional history or family situation. Additionally, due to practical reasons, it was easier to participate for people who were independent of jobs, school holidays and any other obligations, compared to families or working people. Many applicants said that, in the future, they wanted to live in a smaller city. Regardless of the employment situation, the interested persons saw an opportunity to live in a nicer and quieter city with attractive housing that still offered an urban environment.

While half of the participants already knew Görlitz from previous visits, around one third had never been to the city before. Nearly all participants intended to use the project to determine whether Görlitz could meet their requirements for a residential location and their desired quality of life.

4.4 Selected project results

In the following, selected results of the study are presented (Zöllter et al. 2017); in order to gain insights into the question of to what extent third-tier cities might be attractive for newcomers.

In the final questionnaire, completed after the trial week, 78 per cent of participants answered the question regarding a potential move to Görlitz positively (see figure 2). More specifically, 47 per cent approved of a move without any restrictions, while 31 per cent stated that the relocation would depend on various factors. These included the employment situation, the personal and/or family situation and a sufficient supply of housing at affordable prices. Half of the participants able to imagine a move to Görlitz were living in large cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. Currently, we know that 10 households that participated in the project actually moved to Görlitz.

Forty per cent of participants assessed the quality of life in Görlitz as better than in their current place of residence. Here it is also notable that around half of those who described the quality of life in Görlitz as much better were living in large cities. In general, the results show that the participants gained a largely positive view of life in Görlitz. They appreciated the good condition of the historic building stock, which contributed to a pleasant atmosphere. The historic core of Görlitz also scored well in
regard to the number of restaurants and cafes. Other positive factors mentioned by the participants were cleanliness and a high sense of security. In addition, they appreciated the compact nature of the inner city, where travelling distances are short. Although only 42 per cent said that Görlitz is a family-friendly city and only 47 per cent found Görlitz a young and dynamic city, most of the project’s participants appreciated the particular urban lifestyle.

Seventy-one per cent said that Görlitz is a city where one can live cheaply, with a broad variety and affordable supply of houses and apartments. Seventy-two per cent appreciated the good provision of cultural facilities; the project’s participants were less positive about the provision of retail. Thirty-one per cent were not satisfied with the range of shops. Many would have liked to see a supermarket in the inner city. Regarding this, people from large cities were more critical than those from small and medium-sized cities.

Some said that the provision of green spaces near to the neighbourhoods in the historic centre is insufficient. This might be compensated by attractive green spaces in the city as a whole and an attractive landscape in the surrounding, which 88 per cent appreciate. Görlitz’s location in the tri-border region with a direct border to Poland was viewed positively. Seventy-seven per cent of participants agreed with the statement that the city of Görlitz has a special charm due to the presence of the neighbouring Polish city of Zgorzelec. Participants particularly appreciated the international flavour and the opportunity to quickly get to know another country, culture, and language.

A central topic in the survey was related to the ageing society. Many participants underlined the importance of good public transport as well as shopping and medical services. Forty-five per cent of all participants wanted a fully accessible and well-equipped apartment with an elevator. The frequency of this requirement varied across the different age groups, with those aged over 50 expressing this wish most often. In contrast, younger participants more often specified a meeting place in the courtyard as an important requirement. All age groups wished to have a new apartment with a balcony, both of which are rare in the historic buildings of Görlitz’s inner city.

5 Conclusions and perspectives

The results of the ‘Probewohnen – Trial residences’ project has highlighted that the city of Görlitz is indeed attractive for potential newcomers. Of course, this requires a differentiated view appropriate to the different phases of life. The question of whether specific locational advantages in third-tier cities can compensate for locational disadvantages compared with large cities and agglomerations could not be fully answered within this project. Here, the follow-up project ‘Testing the city’, which we introduce at the end, will provide more in-depth knowledge.

5.1 Conclusions for the city of Görlitz

The project has revealed the great interest in the city of Görlitz as a place of residence. In addition to its good infrastructure facilities, there is immense potential in the historic building stock, which is a unique feature of the city.

The project showed that Görlitz is highly attractive to residents of large cities, which are often perceived as noisy and dirty, with unpleasant living conditions and poor access to green space and recreation areas. Similarly, people currently residing in small cities or rural areas appreciate third-tier cities such as Görlitz for their urban environment and a particular urban lifestyle.

Görlitz impresses visitors with its culture and leisure activities as well as attractive landscapes in its surroundings. The broad variety and affordable supply of houses and apartments enable individual residential requirements to be addressed. The comparably good provision of different infrastructure facilities – from museums, theatres, and schools to and public transport services – is definitely assessed as an advantage, compared to cities with similar size.

Looking at a smaller scale, some deficits became apparent. The insufficient provision of green spaces in the historic city centre and the
lack of greenery in general should be addressed in order to make these neighbourhoods more attractive for residents. Also, addressing the needs of specific age groups is important in order to persuade more people to move into the city centre (Zölter et al. 2017).

5.2 Conclusions for urban development policy and the academic debate

Although Görlitz has some peculiarities, such as the immediate border location with Poland, the experiences acquired through the project may be transferable to other third-tier cities with similar assets. A goal for urban development policy in such cities is to become more aware of their specific advantages and to promote these actively. A historic building stock or unique location can be important soft location factors. Moderate property/rental prices and a wide range of housing suitable for various target groups can be vital in attracting future residents. These factors will no doubt become even more important with the continuing digital transformation of the economy, which is ushering in a more flexible and mobile work environment. Specific unique selling points, for example, the border location of Görlitz, may be additional pull factors to attract people to live in such cities.

Due to shrinking populations in many rural areas, third-tier cities in peripheral locations can serve as anchor points, providing much-needed facilities and services. In one German study, a third of participants said they would prefer to live in a small or medium-sized city if this offered the same financial situation and other framework conditions (Federal Foundation of Baukultur 2016: 37).

Third-tier cities, therefore, have the opportunity to profit from current developments in metropolitan and large-city regions. The continuing influx of people into large cities is certainly going to reduce the already limited availability of affordable housing. At the same time, the lack of available space in large cities is turning away investors, who are increasingly focusing on development opportunities in third-tier cities (initially those located within commuting distance of large cities). Related to this is the increasing importance placed on soft location factors by investors and businesses when deciding where to settle (Martin-Brelot et al. 2010: 855). Third-tier cities can also provide an anchor function to rural areas with weakening infrastructures (Bell & Jayne 2009: 691; Demazière 2017: 57). All of these trends are helping to boost the attractiveness of third-tier cities for families, pensioners and younger people. The ongoing decoupling of living and working within the digital transformation will certainly speed up this process.

Especially in third-tier cities, the residential function within the inner city is vital to ensure a lively future. In addition to the supply of suitable housing, appropriate infrastructure and attractive public space are needed. Revitalisation strategies should, therefore, take these aspects into account. Clearly, the preservation of functional urban centres can make an important contribution to sustainable settlement development by maintaining compact city structures with short commuting distances.

Although the findings of the ‘Trial residencies’ project cannot claim general validity for other third-tier cities, we can underline the hypothesis that estimation and valorisation of specific assets being typical for third-tier cities may increase attractiveness for potential newcomers. Taking into account that these cities are dependent on in-migration due to natural population development, strengthening these assets will be a precondition for any stabilisation. Particularly, against the background of growing digitalisation and flexibilisation of the working environment, third-tier cities may have a real chance for a renaissance by providing attractive and affordable living environments. Such a renaissance could make a significant contribution to avoiding spatial polarisation and striving for balanced and sustainable spatial development.

5.3 Perspectives: From ‘Trial residencies’ to ‘Testing the city’

Based on these findings, the transdisciplinary consortium of research institute, municipal authorities and the municipal housing company decided to continue the approach by further developing the ‘Trial residencies’ project. The main refinements were to focus on people of working age, to extend the test session to four weeks and to further elaborate on the potentials of third-tier cities for workers in the creative industries. According to Bell and Jayne, third-tier cities have the potential to attract footloose businesses and relocators (Bell, Jayne 2009: 693). For this reason, the new project entitled ‘Testing the city – Living and Working in Görlitz’ offered working spaces alongside apartments. Thanks to the commitment of three civil society associations in Görlitz and a grant from the national government within the National
Urban Development Policy, it was possible to acquire office workspace in a co-working space, an artist’s studio, and a space in a cultural and creative workshop. To gain more detailed insights into people’s needs and motivations, the accompanying survey will consist of questionnaires and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with all participants.

The first participants in the ‘Testing the city’ project (which was launched in the summer of 2018) arrived in Görlitz in January 2019. By the summer of 2020, 54 households, families or work teams will have the chance to spend four weeks in the city to test local living and working conditions. The high interest generated by the project is shown by the number of applicants, i.e. 150 in total. Two-thirds of these are from bigger cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. The two largest age groups among the applications are 31–40 years and 51–60 years. This underpins the hypothesis that third-tier cities might be a good alternative for mobile people working in the creative sector, for whom it has become more and more difficult to find affordable space that meets their requirements for working and living in their current place of residence and work. Among persons of working age, relocation to third-tier cities may be particularly attractive for people in the phase of starting a family and towards the end of their working life.

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