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Relocation rationale – why people move in connection with renovation projects

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Abstract. The existing housing stock is constantly in need of maintenance and renovation. Previous research has showed that renovation projects may force tenants to move involuntarily, and there is a correlation between the scale of the renovation project, the economic consequences for the tenants, and the relocation frequency. In this paper, the aim is to identify the reasons for tenants' choice to relocate, based on both quantitative and qualitative data. This paper is based on material from a larger study of tenants' experiences of housing renovation and their decision to relocate. From a large empirical material of 426 personal interviews with tenants living in municipally owned rental apartments within the city of Gothenburg, 117 respondents were identified, whose choice to relocate were directly linked to the renovation process. The interviews were transcribed, analyzed and coded into different categories. Preliminary results show that the majority of relocations that occur in connection to renovation projects are in fact not related to the renovation process in itself. The primary reason to move was to upsize, to move in with a partner, to move from rental to home ownership, and to live in another area. Arguments directly connected to the renovation process were to avoid the disturbances connected to living in an apartment while it was being renovated, or avoiding being evacuated and having to move several times, and avoiding the economic consequences of rent increases after the renovation. The results illustrate the vital role of the property owner in planning and organizing the renovation projects in order to minimize the disturbances for the tenants. It supports the current trend to divide renovation projects into smaller segments, applying more diverse strategies and avoiding one-size-fits-all-approaches to renovation.

1. Introduction

In Sweden, the major part of the housing stock was built between 1945 and 1974. Many of these buildings are now facing renovations, often with rent increases as a consequence. New actors have entered the Swedish housing market, with business models based on buying run-down projects, performing luxury renovations to increase the rents, often in direct conflict with the tenants, and then sell with a profit. [1] In renovation projects, authorities and landlords sometimes find a chance to relocate the tenants regardless of their preferences. [2] [3] Long-term actors, such as the municipally owned housing companies that still own the larger part of the residential housing stock usually try to apply more long-term sustainable models regarding maintenance and renovations, with greater respect for the existing tenants. Still, also among the municipally owned companies, renovation projects can create



conflicts with residents, causing people to relocate from affordable rental apartments, not by choice but by force. [4] The probability for a resident to choose to relocate is dependent both on the level of dissatisfaction and the available resources to find a better option. [5] [6] [7]

In this paper, we have followed all the renovation projects planned and performed by three of the municipal housing companies in Gothenburg during a period of three years, 2018-2021, and interviewed the residents in these projects that chose to relocate during the renovation processes. The aim was to better understand their rationales for moving, in relation to the renovation strategies used by the housing companies. The reason for these renovation projects were primarily to maintain the technical standard of the buildings. Improved energy efficiency played a minor role, but was sometimes a side-effect of the measures taken.

2. Method and material

The paper is based on data from a study in Gothenburg, Sweden. During the period 2018 – 2021, three municipal housing companies, representing a housing stock of more than 70 000 rental apartments (48 % of all rental apartments in the city, and 26 % of all housing units), delivered information about all their ongoing renovation projects, and contact information to all of their tenants in these projects who choose to terminate their contracts during the renovation period. In total, the study includes 42 renovation projects with 6933 apartments, and 908 terminated contracts.

All tenants who terminated their contracts were approached and asked if they were willing to take part in an interview about their reason to relocate. In the beginning, interviews were primarily physical interviews, held at a neutral place (e.g. cafés). Due to the pandemic, from 2019 all interviews were done over the phone. The interviews followed a semi-structured template with subject areas. All interviews, lasting from 2-3 minutes up to an hour, were recorded and transcribed. They were then coded and analyzed independently by three different members of the research team.

Table 1. Terminated contracts and interviews

	Unknown reason	Known reason	Total
terminated contracts	409	499	908
Declined	161		
no contact	248		
Death		8	
assisted living		17	
non-residents		9	
not relocating		15	
short-term contract		24	
interviewed		426	

Of all 908 terminated contracts, 161 tenants declined to take part (18 %), and 248 were not possible to reach (27 %). The reason for termination could be identified in 499 cases (55 %). In 49 of these cases, the reason for terminating the contract was considered non-related to the renovation project by definition (death, moving to assisted living, did not live in the apartment, or were not relocating). During the interviews, 24 cases of residents living on short-term contracts (or “renovation contracts”) were found. They were excluded from the rest of the analysis, since their residency was contractually connected to the renovation project by definition. In the end, there were 426 interviews analyzed.

In the analysis, all interviews were coded based on a list of initially 30 different categories with reasons to relocate. This list was expanded during the analysis, based on the content in the interviews, and finally consisted of 40 different categories. Ten of these categories were directly connected to the renovation project (e.g. rent increase due to renovation, dissatisfaction with the result of the renovation,

lack of information about the renovation process, or wanting to avoid renovation or evacuation). The other 30 were general reasons for relocating (e.g. up- or downsizing, home ownership, expecting a baby, wanting to live closer to work, friends or family). The interviews were classified into categories by the research team, and in each interview there could be anything from one up to eight relocation arguments, with an average of 1,2.

All respondents were asked a direct question if their choice to move had anything to do with the renovation project. Based on their answers (sometimes not very clear), 309 interviews were analyzed as non-related to the renovation project (73 %), whereas 117 interviews (27 %) were considered directly or indirectly related to the renovation project. Based on the overall content of the interviews, they were classified as “push” (i.e. a respondents moving, or being forced to move, away from something, in a negative context) or “pull” (i.e. a respondent moving to something, in a positive context). In 49 cases the respondents gave very mixed arguments, and these were classified as combinations, both push and pull. Seven interviews were too short on information to be classified in this aspect.

Table 2. Classification of interviews

All interviews 426	relocation non-related to renovation project 309	non-related unclassified 7
		non-related push/pull 27
		non-related pull 221
		non-related push 54
	relocation related to renovation project 117	related push 55
		related pull 40
		related push/pull 22

3. Results

The overall result, based on 426 interviews, indicate that the majority of the relocations that occur when a residential building with rental apartments is renovated are not related to the renovation process in itself. 73 % of our respondents say that they would have moved anyhow. The single most frequent rationale for moving is upsizing. 27 % of our respondents give this argument, followed by the ambition to change from rental to home ownership (20 %). In a shared third place comes moving in with a partner, and wanting to move to another geographical location (“new horizons”). All these arguments frequently come together, where young people meet a partner, move from a small rental apartment to a private house and start a family. Then come arguments connected to the renovation process. 11 % of all respondents choose to move to avoid living through the renovation or being evacuated. 9 % say that they want to get away from the neighborhood, and 8 % say they move because of the rent increase caused by the renovation. 8 % describe the renovation as a possibility or reason to do what they had planned to do anyhow: relocate. 7 % give the lack of renovation, or poor standard of their apartment, as a reason for moving, and equally as many give downsizing as an argument.

Table 3. Relocation rationale based on 426 interviews

	all interviews (n 426)	non-related to renovation (n=309)	non-related to renovation, push (n=54)	non-related to renovation, pull (n=221)	non-related to renovation, push/pull (n=27)	related to renovation (n=117)	related to renovation, push (n=55)	related to renovation, pull (n=40)	related to renovation, push/pull (n=22)
Upsizing	27%	29%	2%	36%	37%	21%	13%	38%	9%
Home ownership	20%	22%	4%	26%	33%	15%	7%	25%	18%
Partner	17%	22%	4%	29%	7%	4%	0%	5%	14%
New horizons	17%	21%	7%	24%	33%	5%	0%	8%	14%
avoid renovation/evacuation	11%					41%	58%	18%	41%
location, neighborhood	9%	9%	31%	3%	22%	9%	11%	3%	18%
rent increase from renovation	8%					27%	38%	10%	32%
optionality	8%					27%	11%	48%	32%
upgrading									
/lack of renovation	7%	6%	9%	3%	26%	9%	7%	10%	14%
downsizing	7%	4%	7%	3%	7%	13%	13%	8%	23%
apartment offer	6%					22%	16%	30%	23%
standard/quality	6%	6%	20%	2%	15%	5%	5%	5%	5%
disturbing neighbors	6%	6%	24%	0%	22%	3%	4%	0%	9%
dissatisfaction w. result of renovation	3%					12%	13%	5%	23%

By sorting the overall result into two different categories, related or non-related to the renovation process, and applying the filter of push or pull aspects, the picture becomes more nuanced, and one can identify six subsets of arguments.

3.1. Relocations non-related to the renovation process from a push or pull perspective

Relocations that are not related to the renovation process counts for 73 % of all cases in this analysis. They therefore share the profile of the overall result, with upsizing, home ownership, partnership and wanting to move somewhere else as the most frequent arguments. But when dividing them according to the push or pull character, the pattern changes a bit. In the large pull sub category with 221 respondents, the arguments mirror the overall result.

Among the 54 respondents in the push sub category, the most frequent arguments concern the location or neighborhood they want to leave (31 %), problems with disturbing neighbors (23 %), poor standard or quality of their apartment (20 %), and a feeling of discomfort and unsafety in the area (17 %). They are clearly moving away from something, and their present housing situation is connected with negative experiences, but they don't mention anything directly connected to the renovation process. In the small mixed group of 27 respondents with both push and pull character, we find arguments of both types: upsizing and home ownership, combined with a bad location, apartment in need of renovation and disturbing neighbors.

Table 4. Relocations non-related to the renovation process

non-related (n=309)		non-related pull (n=221)		non-related push (n=54)		non-related push/pull 27	
category	share	category	share	category	share	category	share
upsizing	29%	upsizing	36%	location, neighborhood	31%	upsizing	37%
home ownership	22%	partner	29%	disturbing neighbors	24%	home ownership	33%
partner	22%	home ownership	26%	standard, quality	20%	new horizons	33%
new horizons	21%	new horizons	24%	discomfort, unsafe in the area	17%	upgrading/lack of renovation	26%
subletting	10%	subletting	12%	rent level	15%	location, neighborhood	22%
bought a house	10%	bought a house	12%	aging	11%	disturbing neighbors	22%
location, neighborhood	9%	proximity work/school	10%	upgrading/lack of renovation	9%	elevator/balcony	15%
proximity work/school	9%	expecting a baby	9%	downsizing	7%	standard, quality	15%
expecting a baby	7%	proximity family/friends	8%	new horizons	7%	rural	15%
proximity family/friends	7%	downsizing	3%	elevator/balcony	6%	accessibility	11%

3.2. Relocations related to the renovation process from a push or pull perspective

117 respondents (27 %) say that their choice to relocate was connected to the renovation process in their apartment building. 41 % say that they want to avoid the renovation or avoid being evacuated, and 27 % name the rent increase caused by the renovation as a reason to move. 27 % saw the renovation as a reason to realize something they were already planning to do. 22 % were offered a new apartment, and 21 % chose to upsize, while 13 % moved to a smaller space. 15 % bought a house or an apartment. 12 % moved because they were dissatisfied with the result of the renovation.

In the pull subcategory, the top arguments mirror the overall result, with respondents realizing something they would have done anyway (48 %), upsizing (38 %), accepting an offer for another apartment (30 %), or buying (25 %). But 18 % want to avoid renovation or evacuation, and 10 % say that the rent increase caused by the renovation is a reason to move.

In the push sub category, avoiding the renovation (58%) and the increased rent (38 %) are the top arguments, followed by accepting an apartment offer (16 %), and issues connected to aging (15 %). 13 % move because they are dissatisfied with the result of the renovation, and equally many upsize and downsize. In the mixed sub category, avoiding the renovation and the rent increase together with the optionality are the top arguments, but almost a quarter of the respondents in this category are dissatisfied with the renovation result, and the same proportion have downsized. At the lower end of this list we find a new argument: 9 % of the respondents describe how their concern for their pets forced them to relocate in connection to the renovations.

Table 5. Relocations related to the renovation process

related (n=117)		related pull (n=40)		related push (n=55)		related push/pull (n=22)	
category	share	category	share	category	share	category	share
avoid renovation/evacuation	41%	optionality	48%	avoid renovation/evacuation	58%	avoid renovation/evacuation	41%
rent increase from renovation	27%	upsizing	38%	rent increase from renovation	38%	rent increase from renovation	32%
optionality	27%	apartment offer	30%	apartment offer	16%	optionality	32%
apartment offer	22%	home ownership	25%	aging	15%	dissatisfaction w. renovation result	23%
upsizing	21%	avoid renovation/evacuation	18%	dissatisfaction w. renovation result	13%	apartment offer	23%
home ownership	15%	rent increase from renovation	10%	upsizing	13%	downsizing	23%
downsizing	13%	upgrading/lack of renovation	10%	downsizing	13%	home ownership	18%
dissatisfaction w. renovation result	12%	lack of information ab. Renov	8%	optionality	11%	location, neighborhood	18%
upgrading/lack of renovation	9%	downsizing	8%	location, neighborhood	11%	upgrading/lack of renovation	14%
discomfort area	9%	new horizons	8%	pets disturbed	9%	partner	14%

4. Discussion

A strength in this study is the fact that it comprises all renovation projects done by the three largest municipal housing companies in the second largest city in Sweden during a period of three years. We have also been able to identify the reason for tenants relocating in relation to these renovation projects in 55 % of all cases (499 out of 908). In addition to this, we have personal interviews with 426 respondents, giving qualitative information about their rationales for moving. We can also see that our respondents match the average citizen in Gothenburg when we look at age, gender, income, and residency (how long they have lived in their apartments).

73 % of all respondents in this study explain their reasons to relocate as non-related to the renovation processes, and mostly in positive terms. They have met a new partner, they want to have a larger apartment, they want to own their own dwelling. In this respect, the renovation project did not influence their choice to relocate in any negative way, rather acting as a trigger.

Also among the 27 % of the respondents where there is a relation between the renovation process and their choice to move, almost one third describe it mostly in positive terms. The renovation became a triggering factor for a process that would have happened anyway, they moved to a larger space, they were offered an apartment that they found satisfactory, or they bought an apartment or a house.

But among these respondents, there are two thirds (77 out of 117) that report negative, or very negative, emotions in connection to the renovation and relocation process. They (or their pets) did not want to live through a renovation in their present apartment, they did not want to be evacuated and have to move twice, the rent increase was too much, they were worried about the (lack of) information before the renovation started, or they were dissatisfied with the result of the renovation. We are today well aware of the importance our housing situation has on our quality of life, and the experience of being forced to relocate from your private home, against your will, can have serious consequences for our wellbeing. [8] Much of the focus in the public debate about renovations is related to the economic consequences, with rent increases forcing residents to move. [9] What we see in this study is that the renovation project in itself, with the disturbances and stresses it brings, is an even larger cause for people to move than the economic changes.

5. Conclusions

The municipal housing companies have different strategies regarding renovations. In this paper the landlords can find information about negative aspects of renovation processes that could inform their strategies for planning and executing renovations.

Some of the respondents talked about “the Pia effect”. In one of the renovation projects there was a local employee from the housing company, Pia, who knew the residents by name, and took time and engagement to make sure they were informed about what was going to happen in their building. There is no “one-size-fits-all” method to do this, and since the large majority of the residents see their relocation as a positive thing, unrelated to the renovation process, extra resources should be directed to identify the households in need of support, and be provided on a personal basis.

6. Future research

This paper is giving preliminary findings from an ongoing project. Future publications will be looking at renovation strategies, relocation patterns, and energy efficiency connected to renovation strategies.

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