

Andreas Fogarasi
NINE BUILDINGS, STRIPPED (SÜDBAHNHOF)
Detail, 2019

Vienna

The End of Housing (as a Typology)

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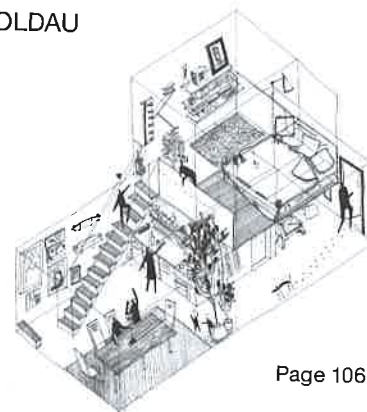
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Social(ist) Housing Housing as Public Interest, Political Demand, and Architectural Task

Text: Gabu Heindl

The “Vienna Model” is today regarded in Europe and beyond as a paradigm for social housing and thus for a welfare-state approach to crisis-like phenomena in metropolitan housing supply, which have been exacerbated by urban growth and the capitalization of urban space. Nevertheless, rising social inequality in Vienna is also becoming increasingly apparent: In the private rental sector, 43 percent of tenants’ housing costs exceed 40 percent of their income. This hits low-income households dependent on private-market housing particularly hard.

In the following essay, the Vienna Model will be subjected to a two-part analysis with regard to its ambivalences and potentials. On the one hand, I want to closely examine the model, that is, to measure it against its claims and to question it in relation to its history, i.e., to housing policy as part of the socialist-egalitarian project of Red Vienna (→ GLOSSARY) in the 1920s. On the other hand, the historical and current Viennese housing policy, which is shaped by social democracy, is to be contrasted with the opposing, strictly market-oriented approach to solving the global “housing problem” by calling for the abolition of state-subsidized social housing per se. The eight theses presented by Patrik Schumacher at the World Architecture Festival in Berlin in November 2016 as the *Urban Policy Manifesto for London*, and elaborated on in an expanded form for the liberal Adam Smith Institute in 2018, are a prominent and heatedly discussed example of such a discourse in architecture.⁰¹ This essay is also intended as a “radical democracy”-oriented sketch of analysis and response to the demands such a discourse raises and the political understanding of society that it expresses.⁰²

Suppose the initial question is how housing in big cities can be made affordable. Neoliberal think tanks have a clear answer ready: Finally, let the truly free hand of the market prevail, favor meritocratic competition, and tolerate the displacement of those who cannot afford to live in the city. In short: Stop all political intervention. Based on the Vienna Model (and a radical democratic critique of the latter) we can show an alternative to this.

(DE)REGULATION

Schumacher's first postulate is to "regulate the planners": The "right to build" should only be restricted by planning if a building project conflicts with development possibilities, with traffic infrastructure, with monument and environmental protection regulations, or with the rights of neighbors (e.g., a right to sunlight). He demands that "nothing else can be brought to bear" here: "No social engineering agendas!"⁸³

Schumacher is implicitly calling for reducing planning primarily to technical rules and keeping it free of political agendas. This corresponds to a "post-political" view of planning that is itself highly political, and, at the same time, ties in with right-wing critiques of master planning. The concern with "over-regulation" typical of this critique fails to recognize that agendas are always set, and thus regulations are made, even and especially when they are not articulated publicly (e.g., in the form of laws).

Precisely this kind of neoliberal "depoliticization" is evident in cities the world over: The increasing deregulation of planning, such as operating with non-binding guidelines, is giving rise to a veritable "negotiated urbanism" based on those guidelines' free interpretability, which is flexible toward capital interests and thus toward investor-driven urban planning, while at the same time working toward a "lean" administration in the sense of a market-liberal policy.⁸⁴ In contrast, the first step towards a radical democratic planning policy is to avoid the "policy phobia" of neo-liberal discourses, i.e., a critique of deregulation, and—to paraphrase Hannah Arendt—the insight that freedom always requires a public space for its development, enclosed by rules. Laws condition the margin for maneuver of human freedom.⁸⁵

LAND POLICY

Only the market, as a self-regulating force, should decide what gets built where—this is how Schumacher calls for the "abolition of all land-use prescriptions."⁸⁶ In this perspective, built urban space is not the result of a political agreement but emerges from the omniscience of the market. Apart from the fact that, historically, there has never been a free market, but always processes of monopoly formation, this thinking in terms of "ideal types" is characteristic of an approach that wants to build society, and thus also the city, ex nihilo—from an ideal ground, far from any social reality. But with such notions of ideal market conditions as in the laboratory experiment, market apologetics are closer to the totalitarian master plan than they think.

The history of Vienna's planning policy offers a revealing counter-example. The Social-Democratic Vienna city government, which, from 1919 to 1934 came to be known as Red Vienna, saw itself as

revolutionary, but not in the sense that it aimed at the construction of a new society from an ideal foundation, but much more pragmatically in its concrete political action against the prevailing market dynamics. In Red Vienna, the starting point for building new forms of social order and collective welfare was essentially seen in urban planning policy. Less concerned with urban planning in the broad sense, this policy focused primarily on housing (in addition to planning prominent cultural buildings and a comprehensive healthcare infrastructure). And while Red Vienna offered no real alternative to the capitalist city, it nevertheless pursued a different policy of hegemony adapted to the available terrain. Specifically, a housing requisition law allowed the municipality to requisition "duplexes and units occupied at improperly low capacity in the interest of those in need of housing." Combined with strong tenant protection, this policy ensured that neither speculation nor large-scale profit generation was possible in private housing at all, which is why private construction activity declined and land prices in the city fell massively. This made it possible for the municipality to acquire large swaths of land on which it built the municipal perimeter-block housing estates that are still iconic today. The latter were funded with the help of a progressive redistribution tax called the "housing tax." Here as well, planning did not start from an ideal type but was pursued pragmatically, wherever there was space for it.

Following in the footsteps of Red Vienna, the municipality has pursued an active land policy to this day, primarily through the *wohnfonds_wien* (→ GLOSSARY), founded in 1984 as the "Vienna Land Procurement and Urban Renewal Fund," which is active in acquiring land and launching concept-based competitions for housing developments. However, as a result of the global financialization of urban space and the speculative real estate market, land prices in Vienna are now barely affordable for this fund. In fact, on international real estate platforms, Vienna is described as an important "gateway to eastern Europe" and as a safe investment location with a "stable market." The groundwork for this was laid in the Austrian Tenancy Act of 1981, which repealed price caps for rentals in new construction, with later revisions allowing fixed-term contracts and surcharges based on a unit's location within the conurbation.⁸⁷

A remarkable political reaction to the increasing land speculation in Vienna is the *subsidized housing* zoning category introduced by Vienna's governing coalition of Social Democrats and Greens in 2018, which de facto caps land prices in (re)zoning procedures. On the part of the capital side, i.e., the owners of the land to be rezoned, the objection was raised that this was virtually an expropriation measure; however, this assumption implies that the profit margins achievable through non-subsidized housing are regarded from the outset as the

property of the landowners. What is being “expropriated” here—under loud protest—is a speculative prospect.

MILIEU/MONUMENT PROTECTION

With his third claim, Schumacher calls to “stop all vain and unproductive attempts at ‘milieu protection.’” The protection of milieus, of environments, even of the sociocultural character of neighborhoods, is seen here as another form of illegitimate “social engineering” standing in the way of progress and productivity.⁶⁸

Vienna’s municipal government has no milieu protection regulations comparable to the ones in Berlin which it could wield as a political lever against gentrification; nevertheless, investors’ interests in Vienna increasingly collide with the protection of historic monuments. A prominent example is the controversy surrounding a planned luxury apartment tower on Heumarkt square. In the sense of political pragmatism, the—literally—conservative instrument of monument protection can be used for progressive radical democratic goals. Undoubtedly, this raises the problem that criticism of investor-driven politics and speculation with urban space can unwittingly parrot a “right-wing” discourse—as happened in Vienna in the form of the Freedom Party’s (FPÖ) massive campaign against the tower project. In contrast to the ideal model propagated by Schumacher and others, however, in urban planning, we are always dealing with real conditions, i.e., *impure* constellations—in which a radical, democratic, “left-wing” critique must draw precise contours if it does not want to make common cause with right-wing resentments, despite the occasional overlap. In this context, we have to ask ourselves the broader ecological and socio-economic questions far beyond the classical field of monument protection: What do we define as a monument or a milieu worthy of protection?

STANDARDS

“Abolish all prescriptive housing standards. ... Stop all interventions and distortions of the (residential) real estate market.” Only the market can produce “the most useful, productive and life/prosperity-enhancing mix,” is Schumacher’s fourth commandment.⁶⁹ Public regulations regarding apartment sizes, types, distribution, etc., which, according to him, would restrict free choice on the housing market, should be abolished.

Such argumentation is based on the assumption that a flexible individual with a middle-class education is the exemplary model subject of any planning and misses the social reality of many people’s lives. A lot of people do not have the freedom to choose because they lack the means to do so. Political tolerance for ever-smaller housing units seems to address the housing needs of primarily young students

with the temporary lifestyle of a digital minimalist. If we take into account the fact that living in minimal units also affects precariously employed migrant workers in overcrowded rooms, the argument’s blindness to power dynamics becomes apparent. The minimum requirements for what constitutes a housing unit—ever smaller floor plans, ever lower ceilings—are bottomless. The tenants’ limited freedom of choice or defenselessness in the face of such dynamics corresponds roughly to workers’ coerced willingness to participate in wage dumping.

In this light, an ambivalent legacy of Red Vienna, or continuity, emerges: While the municipal government had sought higher wages and higher housing standards, Red Vienna’s apartments were so small at the beginning of its municipal housing program that they had to be enlarged after criticism at the 1926 Vienna International Housing and Urban Development Congress.¹⁰ In other words, the price for an undisputed alleviation of the mass housing misery was the production of housing units at the margins of subsistence. Such a “creatively” implemented willingness to provide the many dispossessed with the bare minimum is echoed in today’s “SMART living” housing subsidy initiative, which aims to build more affordable housing by means of downsizing the individual units. Today, this creates the same dilemma as the one that Giancarlo De Carlo already criticized in 1969 in relation to progressive interwar plans for a “Minimum Dwelling” (*Wohnung für das Existenzminimum*): Architectural creativity is called upon to compensate for—and thus to enable—a lack of space created by powerful capital interests.¹¹

SOCIAL HOUSING

“Abolish all forms of social and affordable housing.”¹² According to Schumacher and market-liberal proponents, all social housing should be privatized, and housing subsidies replaced with financial support without specific purpose allocation. I agree that subsidies without restrictions on use would be acceptable within the framework of a policy that distributes wealth, for example, through an unconditional basic income. I also agree with the criticism of housing subsidies, albeit for a different reason: They are nothing more than a transfer of public money to private landlords. Rent subsidies for housing on the free market are direct handouts to owners by the taxpayer.

Instead of subsidizing the individual, the Vienna Model is based on subsidizing properties by investing in the municipal housing infrastructure and its noncommerciality to ensure broad affordability. In principle, such a redistribution policy that works against the “free market” makes sense not least because the “free market” is a figment even under laboratory conditions—for example, with regard to the

basic meritocratic assumption that *productive* people *earn* their wealth. In fact, private wealth, as well as real estate ownership, in Vienna and beyond, has long been created essentially through inheritance or speculation, often with the help of privatized public assets. In the specific case of Vienna, which has never sold off its municipal housing stock, the transfer of social housing to the private market has at least been contained, in contrast to many cities that have followed the mantra of privatization.

(DE)PRIVATIZATION

As a sixth point, Schumacher makes the following demand: "Abolish all government subsidies for homeownership, like Help to Buy: This distorts real housing preferences and biases against mobility."¹³

This should be critically examined from various perspectives, especially in view of Vienna's housing and planning situation. First, this claim is problematic because, once again, it elevates a dynamic middle-class subject to the standard of a general argument, as the great emphasis on mobility is more in line with the lifestyle of an entrepreneurial jet-set class. It ignores the fact that not everyone can or wants to be mobile but that many need or desire housing security—and get too little of it.

In principle, there is something to be gained from the rejection of homeownership subsidies because housing security should not be made dependent on private ownership of housing. Here, a historical view, sensitive to political power constellations, is revealing: In Vienna, housing security is largely ensured by the municipality through rentals, namely by keeping rents low, mandating open-ended rental contracts, and ensuring the possibility to pass on apartments to relatives. Another important factor for housing security is the peace of mind associated with knowing that affordable rental housing (in municipal or non-profit housing, which house close to half of Vienna's population) will be available in case of need. This situation, however, has recently evolved: Due to the decline in municipal building activity and the turn instead toward subsidizing housing construction (some of it by for-profit developers), a growing proportion of people in Vienna now live in subsidized housing. This housing model has lately been targeted by privatization campaigns propagating rent-to-buy models and the Federal Government setting up the corresponding legal conditions for a right to buy.¹⁴

Ironically, this measure—itsself an expression of a deeply neoliberal agenda—is very similar to the Help to Buy model rejected from Patrik Schumacher's libertarian perspective. The radical democratic objection, however, is a fundamentally different one: Encouraging the private purchase of subsidized rental housing is not wrong because it

would distort a market or because people would use housing "beyond their means"; rather, it corresponds to a process of outsourcing more and more responsibility to the private sector coupled with the dismantling of public provisioning as well as pensions and insurance systems, turning homeownership into a retirement plan for those who can afford it. The option to privatize housing built with public money is part of a comprehensive capitalization of commons which are then repurposed into a speculative financial instrument.

TENANT PROTECTION

Schumacher's seventh thesis is to "abolish all forms of rent control and one-fits-all regulation of tenancies: Instead allow[ing] for free contracting on tenancy terms and let[ting] a thousand flowers bloom." The goal of such deregulation, he says, is "the creation of the dense, urban fabric that delivers the stimulating urbanity many of us desire and know to be a key condition of further productivity gains within our post-Fordist network society."¹⁵

The "dense, urban fabric" also remains the goal of Vienna's social-democratic urban planning policies, beginning with the perimeter-block housing developments of Red Vienna and extending to the urban densification agendas of the last twenty years. In Schumacher's formulation, this dense, urban fabric is linked to other motives, one being that of "further productivity gains," which, ironically, indicates a certain proximity between neoliberal *and* traditional socialist discourse—and, what's more, a certain overlap with Maoism, from which Schumacher paraphrases the anti-monopolistic "hundred flowers" slogan. Productivity and a certain fixation on gainful employment have always been part of the programmatic folklore of social democracy, especially in Red Vienna. The difference, however, was that cries of "Die Arbeit hoch!" (Praise Work!) were usually followed by "Die Löhne höher!" (... And Raise Wages!) reflected in the negotiation of minimum wages and unionization. Invoking a specifically "post-Fordist" productivity in contemporary network society, on the other hand, is critically associated with low-wage development and, above all, to the dismantling of general collective bargaining power and union representation.

Let us briefly contrast Schumacher's seventh thesis concerning the "abolition of all forms of rent control" with the Viennese housing situation: Approximately 78 percent of Viennese live in rental apartments and, at least partially, still enjoy comparatively good tenant protection. However, the trend toward condominiums has recently been growing in Vienna. This is due to the increasing housing insecurity in the rental sector, partly created by a Federal political strategy, namely by massive lobbying on the part of homeowners.

Vienna's urban densification and the introduction of location surcharges provide a good sketch of the political-ideological positions on housing management: For those who essentially see the city as a market, increased demand for housing and the presence of useful and attractive public infrastructures around a privately owned property are favorable value-adding factors to be translated into increased profit through entrepreneurial skill (and lobbying to create appropriate administrative frameworks). From this point of view, strong tenant protections prevent the market from allocating goods because it discourages landlords from supplying housing precisely because the conditions imposed—low rents, mandatory long-term tenancies—would be economically unfavorable. The (neo)liberal party NEOS, the Social Democrats' new coalition partner in Vienna's municipal government since 2020, has floated the idea of further reducing the minimum term of tenancies from three years to six months. In this line of thinking, it is only consistent to abandon the remaining legal standards of tenancy to the extent that these relationships can always be renegotiated on a case-by-case basis between the respective market actors, analogous to the deregulation of wage relationships or the aforementioned "negotiated urbanism."

If we leave behind this market-radical view of the city in favor of a communal economic perspective, it becomes apparent that housing costs should actually fall in the course of urban growth and the accompanying densification. After all, the same infrastructures are financed and used by an ever-greater number of people. Basically, all apartments whose construction costs have been recouped could be offered at a rent reflecting the cost of operation. In Austria, this applies to all limited-profit housing associations according to the Limited-Profit Housing Act, reducing rent to few euros per square meter. Furthermore, any surpluses generated in the limited-profit sector must be reinvested (→ ERNST GRUBER'S ESSAY). Renting a limited-profit apartment thus builds up socially bound collective wealth. If we go beyond the arithmetical cost-benefit logic and instead begin to understand the city as a social public sphere with its dynamics and power relations of various kinds, then every exchange relationship is a power relationship. This equally applies to the relationship between those who supply housing and the great mass of those who need it, without, however, being able to afford it "at all costs"—or at the cost "the market will bear."¹⁶

Understanding the city as a society puts the transactional view into perspective, whereby housing that is not optimally allocated remains withdrawn from the market (as vacant space). A housing unit's pure exchange value becomes less important than its use-value, than the multiplicity of claims and modes of shaping space. Understanding housing as commons includes the agency and needs of individuals (not

their reduction to customers or "service providers"). This agency does not mean compulsive permanent activity, but—precisely because we are talking about housing—also spaces and moments of care, reproductive work, and idleness.

This "stimulating urbanity" is not to be equated with a developer's ideas of growth and capital exploitation of spatial potentials. A neighborhood with a large building stock left vacant for purposes of speculation is not "stimulating," just as housing is not an investment product. Rather, housing is a human right, and thus to be defined as an explicit public interest, making public action a political obligation.

PUBLIC SPACE

Lastly, Schumacher demands: "Privatize all streets, squares, public spaces, and parks, possibly whole urban districts."¹⁷ This postulate can easily be understood as a provocation. And it is advisable not to fall for this PR stunt in the form of a provocation through indignation. On the other hand, why should we not think about the privatization of all health care, the police, and, ultimately, even the air we breathe? Moreover, why should we feel provoked by something that is no longer even particularly crassly exaggerated or dystopian but is ultimately already present in germinal forms in everyday life? In occasionally idyllic forms in Vienna as well: One just needs to think of the districts that have been cleaned out and taken out of the public domain, like Viertel Zwei or the Museum district, whose legally defined or consumerist and ethnocultural markings are nothing short of exclusionary. Or think of how the issue of access to or exclusion from recreational areas, urban greenery, and cooling, aggravated by the ecological crisis, will increasingly become a task that a radical democratic planning policy, and thus also architects, will have to face.¹⁸

01 See "Land of the Free Forces," Patrik Schumacher in conversation with Arno Brandhuber, *ARCH+ The Property Issue: Ground Control and the Commons* (2018), 96–101. See also the rebuttal by Manuel Shvartzberg Carrió, "Defending Democracy: Against Anarcho-Capitalist Architecture," *ibid.*, 102–7.

02 For a proposal for radical-democratic planning and construction politics, a critical analysis of Red Vienna's housing policies, see Gabu Heindl, *Stadtkonflikte: Radikale Demokratie in Architektur und Stadtplanung* (Vienna: Mandelbaum), 2020.

03 Schumacher and Brandhuber, "Land of the Free Forces" (see note 1), 97.

04 The power of investors in construction projects in the financialized real estate industry is demonstrated by the almost systemic reduction of previously agreed-upon social provisions in the course of a project's development. For example, the result is the construction of significantly fewer social housing units than contractually agreed. In Vienna, the three-highrise ensemble Trillple (ARE Austrian Real Estate and Soravia) is a good example: In the urban development contract, large-scale infrastructural investments and the construction of 30 social housing units were promised. However, the latter were never implemented in the exclusive apartment towers, allegedly for technical reasons. Negotiated urbanism is a trial of strength. Who represents the general public in negotiating with the representatives of the particular interests of the investors, and with what interests? Since these are contracts under private law, they are not transparent.

05 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951. Reprint, London: Penguin Books, 2017), 611.

06 Schumacher and Brandhuber, "Land of the Free Forces" (see note 1), 97.

07 Major players in the land and real estate market in Vienna include Blackrock, Vonovia (owner of the former federal housing agency BUWOG), the real estate investment manager COR-ESTATE (Trillple Towers), and others; the Donaumarina Studios residential development was bought by the Bavarian pension fund even before construction began and is a practical example of how retirement plans are conceptually shifting from the idea of secure rental housing to the financial speculation of pension funds.

08 Schumacher and Brandhuber, "Land of the Free Forces" (see note 1), 97.

09 *Ibid.*

10 Cf. Helmut Wehsmann, *Das Rote Wien: Sozialdemokratische Architektur und Kommunalpolitik 1919–1934* (Vienna: Promedia, 2002), 40.

11 Cf. Giancarlo De Carlo: "Architecture's Public" (1969), in *Architecture and Participation*, eds. Peter Blundell Jones et al. (London: Routledge, 2005).

12 Schumacher and Brandhuber, "Land of the Free Forces" (see note 1), 97.

13 *Ibid.*

14 An amendment to the law means that subsidized apartments can now be offered for sale after just five years. If—as is increasingly the case—commercial developers build subsidized housing, it is no longer subject to rent control after a certain period of time. This means that housing built with public subsidies becomes private property.

15 Schumacher and Brandhuber, "Land of the Free Forces" (see note 1), 97.

16 These power relations, on top of the capital relation, express themselves, for example, in mechanisms of exclusion (racist, anti-immigrant, favoring the nuclear family as a privileged bourgeois model of life, etc.). Unfortunately, they are not reducible to private sector housing. A radical democratic understanding criticizes these forms of exclusion in the same way as it criticizes economic ones. See Gabu Heindl, *Working Women Wohnen: Wohn-, Arbeits- und Alltagsraum-Konzept für Frauen. Solidarisch, Leistbar, Leiwand* (Vienna: City of Vienna, MA 50, Referat Wohnbau-forschung und internationale Beziehungen, 2020).

17 Schumacher and Brandhuber, "Land of the Free Forces" (see note 1), 97.

18 See Heindl, *Stadtkonflikte* (see note 2).

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