

Viennese housing

Text in connection with the exhibition:

Housing in Vienna– Innovative. Social. Ecological, January - April 30, 2009



Vienna plays a prominent role throughout the world in domestic architecture. Almost 60 percent of all Viennese households are accommodated in housing assisted by the public sector; 220,000 of these are in community rented apartments. The city invests annually in the construction of between 5,000 and 7,000 publicly assisted dwellings – that is approximately 80 to 90 per cent of the total volume of newly constructed buildings. It is required that innovative and ecological architecture be made available to all social classes. This comprehensive model, consisting of a housing policy fulfilling the planning requirements of social and ecological sustainability, has been built up in stages since the end of the First World War and is being continually developed today.

Shortage of housing in Vienna before 1918

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the population of Vienna increased fivefold from about 400,000 to more than two million. House building was confined almost entirely to the private sector. About 95 per cent of all dwellings did not have a lavatory or running water and just consisted of a kitchen and one room inhabited often by more than ten people. Besides this there were ten thousand homeless people and so called “Bettgeher”, people who just rented a bed for a few hours per day. Judged against international standards, the housing situation in Vienna was the worst in Europe. Externally, these rented apartments resembled the renaissance facades of the palaces in the Ringstrasse: for this reason, the architect Adolf Loos spoke of a “Potemkin town”, i.e. one with sham facades.

The Viennese residents’ movement: A housing reform from the grass roots

After the First World War the housing situation deteriorated further and gave rise to a revolutionary atmosphere. The city of Vienna was confronted by several demonstrations voicing the concerns of up to 100,000 members from residents’ organisations. It therefore finally offered support by converting and purchasing sites, providing building materials and professional help. The residents then formed cooperatives and opened their own workshops producing bricks and windows etc. They had to undertake to carry out their own construction work, but also contributed to the development as a whole. On completion, lots were drawn for the individual houses. The quality of the construction and architecture of the approximately 15,000 terraced houses on 50 estates is impressive. Adolf Loos, who was for a time the chief architect in the Estate Office for the City of Vienna, played a prominent role in advising the cooperatives on architectural matters. His colleague, Margarethe Schütte-Lihotzky, designed what was probably the first fitted kitchen in the world; later she developed this into the famous “Frankfurt kitchen”.

Vienna from 1918-1934

Finance remained the crucial issue in social housing after 1919. The most important and partially ring-fenced taxes were the land tax, incremental tax, and the tax on residential building which was introduced in 1923 and tapered according to the size of the building. This amounted to an annual payment of 2.083 percent of the pre-war rent for a worker’s apartment, up to 36.64 percent for luxury dwellings. The imposition of a steep progression differentiated this social housing finance scheme

from those in other European countries.

By 1934 a total of 61,175 dwellings had been constructed by the Municipality of Vienna in 348 residential complexes and 42 estates with a total of 5,257 houses. In 1934 a tenth of the population in Vienna was already living in community housing. The layout of this community housing with communal areas, baths, kindergarten, laundries, cooperative stores, libraries etc. was an important step towards the development of social and democratic principles in the housing sector.

The building programme of 1923 catered for two types of dwelling: the smaller one (35 square metres) consisting of a main room, kitchen, anteroom and lavatory; the larger (45 square metres) had a small additional room. The salient feature of community housing was the “Wohnküche” (kitchen-cum-living room); for reasons of economy there was no bathroom or central heating. Because courtyards with areas of green replaced dingy backyards, the distinction between good dwellings on streets and bad dwellings in backyards disappeared. In contrast to the blocks constructed during the expansionist period, access to houses was now via communal, semi-communal and virtually private areas; this was generally facilitated by arranging stairways within the courtyards.

Additionally, the City Building Authority also specified standardised building components. Doors, windows, metal fittings, banisters, mountings, sanitary ware, gas stoves, even garden seats were often ordered in bulk for a whole year's building programme. These features were symbolic of a new attitude and explain why, despite a great profusion of architectural styles, twentieth century community housing is easily identified in the cityscape.

The Karl Marx-Hof is particularly representative of this period. The building, planned by Karl Ehn in 1927, with its 1,200 dwellings and numerous communal facilities – including laundries, kindergarten, a library and even its own fittings advisory service – stands out because of the impressive architecture of its central wing and the spaciousness of its green inner courtyards. Only 30 percent of the green area was built on; this contrasts with the private speculative building of the 1870s when density reached 90 per cent.

The Viennese Werkbundsiedlung (estate supported by the Werkbund, an association of artists, architects, designers and industrialists) was completed in 1932 by the Municipality of Vienna on the recommendation of Josef Frank, one of the Werkbund founders, as an example of a model estate with simple houses. Amongst its most notable features are the semi-detached houses by Adolf Loos, the terraced houses by Gerrit Rietveld, and the detached house by Richard Neutra.

Social housing after 1945

Vienna was hit hard by war damage, famine and its division into four sectors after the Second World War. As early as 1945, the most important goals of a communal policy were detailed within a survey prepared for the reconstruction. Amongst them was the alleviation of densely built-up areas of the city, a concentration of garden estates on the periphery, and the holding of architectural competitions. The housing shortfall amounted to 117,000 units.

The first large building project undertaken by the Municipality of Vienna after the Second World War was the Per-Albin-Hansson-Estate planned by Franz Schuster, a project which was committed to the Garden Town Concept of the inter-war years. Its construction was facilitated by an aid programme provided by the Swedish government.

The large scale extension of the city began from the 1960s onwards with the construction of more than 10,000 new publicly assisted dwellings per year. By the 1970s, publicly assisted housing attached increasing importance to the provision of spacious green areas, protection against environmental

hazards and the proximity of adequate facilities and infrastructure. The Am Schoepfwerk (Am Schöpfwerk) estate, which was created under the overall management of Viktor Hufnagl, is particularly interesting as it enabled a group of young architects to implement their collective vision. Alt Erlaa, an estate of terraced houses (Harry Glück, Hlaweniczka, Requat & Reinthaller 1976) with more than 3,000 dwellings and a particularly extravagant infrastructure – including rooftop swimming pools – set new standards for Vienna's socially-orientated housing.

New estates, the estate at Biberhaufenweg for example (Tesar, Pruscha, Häuselmayer, Wafler), or the Wienerberg development (Otto Häuselmayer's master plan) and the so called Baulückenprojekte (promotion of empty spaces between buildings) were characteristic of the 1980s. An attempt was made to counteract the monotony of the great city expansion projects with individual architecture and the utilisation of small sections.

At the beginning of the 1980s, assisted city renewal clearly emerged as an important area of activity in housing policy leading to an internationally acclaimed model of socially- orientated "gentle" city regeneration. It was social in as much as the city made considerable contributions to redevelopment, ensuring that the rents remained affordable even after extensive work had been carried out on revitalisation. It was gentle because the residents could continue to live in their houses or were provided with alternative accommodation during redevelopment work. The socially deprived were not forced into areas where rents were cheaper, thus effectively preventing the formation of ghettos.

The habitable periphery

From the mid 1980s onwards, city expansion was given extra attention. In contrast to the large estates of the previous decades, there was an attempt, with the introduction of multi-tiered competitions and the incorporation of different developers, to achieve a more differentiated architecture. The aim was to arrive at urban diversity together with a social mix. In the process a few exciting experimental projects emerged: e.g. the Pilotengasse estate (Krischanitz, Herzog & de Meuron, Steidle) and the Traviatagasse housing complex (Raimund Abraham's master plan).

Themed estates

In the 1990s, domestic architecture was faced with new challenges presented by social change: the increasingly heterogeneous nature of society, changes in people's way of life, the trend to individuality, and the pluralisation of life styles. Under the slogan "themed living", experimental concepts of living came about. Examples of this are Compact City, combining life and work (BUSarchitecture), Frauen-Werk-Stadt (women-work-city) exclusively planned by female architects (Ullmann, Prochazka, Peretti, Podreka), the Carfree Housing Estate (Szedenik, Schindler) and integrated living projects like the project Integrated Living (Schluder, Kastner). The most radical experiment until then in the area of assisted housing is represented by the so called Coffin Factory (Sargfabrik, Baukuenstlerkollektiv2) in the densely populated 14th district. The project, planned by an initiative group, organises living space on a former business site in the form of multifunctional boxes designed for living and offers an extensive range of communal leisure facilities – including a restaurant, sauna, function rooms, and kindergarten which are open to the whole suburb. The "Miss Sargfabrik" in the neighbouring block has since followed the first complex which was awarded the Adolf-Loos-Preis.

The formation of city suburbs

The construction of Danube City from 1992 onwards made it possible to build a whole new suburb on the left bank of the Neue Donau. Together with high rise office blocks, a school, a church, kindergarten and shops, based on the Krischanitz/Neumann master plan, numerous dwellings emerged including a multi-storey building and a complex of buildings designed by the architects Delugan_ Meissi parallel to the river. In the immediate vicinity are the Neue Donau (Harry Seidler) and the Alte

Donau (Coop Himmelb(l)au, NFOG, Peichl) housing areas.

Similarly large development projects are typical of the areas to the south of the city: Wienerberg-City (Massimiliano Fuksas's master plan) with terraced housing and multi-storey residential property, Monte Laa, situated above the motorway (Hollein/Albert Wimmer's master plan) and Kabelwerk, where a new participation model was trialled. With Gasometer-City, containing around 600 homes came one of the largest and most spectacular conversion projects in Europe.

Current Housing in Vienna

European and global developments also pose new challenges for assisted housing in Vienna. Amongst these is the awareness of the way natural resources are used. The reduction of energy for heating purposes by building passive houses and the use of sustainable raw materials like wood are becoming increasingly important. Mühlweg, the first multi-storey wooden homes – (Dietrich/Untertrifaller, Riess, Kaufmann und Kaufmann) – and passive homes like the Molkereistraße students' accommodation (Baumschlager/Eberle,) point the way forward for assisted housing. On Europe's largest environmentally friendly building site in Thürlnhofstraße (Reinberg, Thalbauer), the projekt RUMBA (guidelines for the environmentally friendly management of building sites) demonstrates how to carry out construction work without damage to the environment by means of a reduction in the use of heavy goods vehicles, environmentally friendly site logistics, and the presorting of construction waste.

Homes for all ages

Comprehensive legal requirements, promoting unrestricted design in the housing sector, have been in force in Vienna since 2004. Based on the principle of enabling everybody to lead an independent life as long as possible within their own four walls, an increasing number of different types of homes are being integrated into "normal" housing patterns: for example sheltered accommodation, flats with integrated service and care, and homes for more than one generation.

With its areas which provide supervised care, Vienna has for years had efficient, welcoming institutions covering all aspects and problems associated with housing. In the spring of 2007, the extension of areas providing care marked a further step in the direction of more intensive care resources. At the same time the role of tenants' associations was further enhanced in community homes.

Ecology and climate protection

The sparing use of natural resources and the reduction of CO₂ emissions are being given greater priority. Consequently, the required quality standards relating to climate protection are being tightened with regard to assisted housing, and the funding for the creation of ecological buildings is being enhanced. Building on success already achieved, the conversion of houses to thermal energy, the construction of passive houses and experiments with renewable energies and raw materials will play an even greater role. Europe's largest passive house project, "Eurogate", is part of this.

A functional and social mix

There is a greater concentration on the mix of roles – housing, work, leisure – particularly when constructing large areas of city expansion. This not only increases the attractiveness of new areas in the city, but also contributes to the reduction of unnecessary journeys and to better protection of the environment. A redevelopment plan which is being vigorously pursued has been drawn up for areas of Vienna in particular need of renewal. In so doing the city is taking a further step along the path of gentle city renewal. Not only are old buildings being improved with the support of higher funding but whole areas are being more attractively designed.

A profusion of life styles

Ways of living and the composition of households are becoming increasingly differentiated in our society: singles, families, communes. Those seeking a home must be given a choice between different styles of living. Future architecture needs therefore to be considerably more flexible and to offer flexible styles of living and layouts which can adapt swiftly to new requirements: living and working under the same roof for example.

User-friendly and affordable homes

In view of the rapid diversification of lifestyles and demographic progress, greater importance is being attached to user-friendliness and increasing demands are made on the quality of homes, their surroundings and their “general fitness for purpose.” Those aspiring to a home are becoming critical consumers who wish to have areas of freedom in their own home, children’s play areas close by, and well lit access to their home “without any anxiety.”

But these homes must remain affordable for all inhabitants of Vienna. Good domestic architecture must therefore continue to demonstrate high quality and sound cost-effectiveness. It is therefore important to preserve and further develop public assisted housing. Doing so will reinforce Vienna’s position internationally as a model city for housing, not only from an architectural point of view but also from a social and an ecological one.