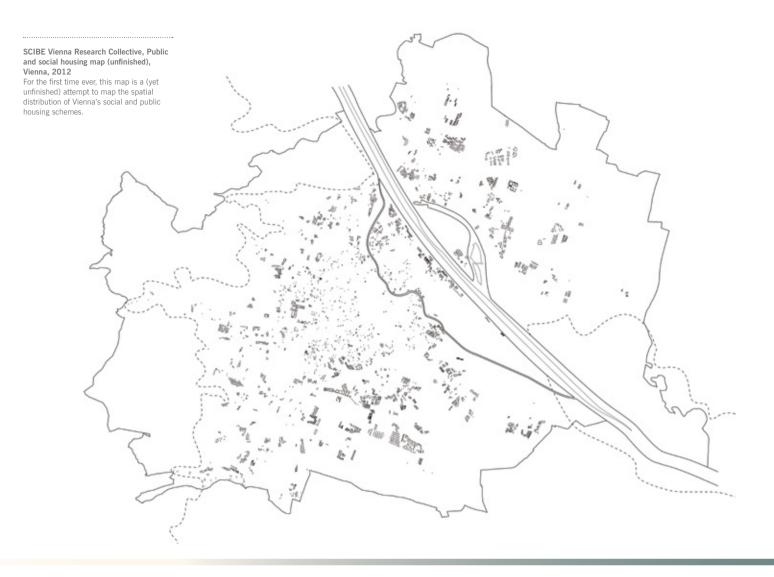*Andreas Rumpfhuber, Michael Klein and Georg Kolmayr*

ALMOST ALL RIGHT

VIENNA'S SOCIAL HOUSING PROVISION

PPAG Architects with the GESIBA housing association, Wohnen am Park, Vienna, 2009
Georg Poduschka's and Anna Popelka's (PPAG) design as part of the new development of a disused railway area near the city centre is a brilliant elaboration of 274 varying singular housing units within one building block. The playful yet strict interior organisation has been enriched by a comprehensive semi-public infrastructure including a library.

By discussing the specific case of Vienna's social housing provision,[1] the aim here is to identify some of the concrete aspects and functions of scarcity. Doing this opens up a productive understanding of the highly relevant, yet ambivalent concept of scarcity within contemporary debate. The concept of scarcity is useful when it comes to rethinking an economy of endless growth, shifting instead towards an economy of stability, resilience and constant reorganisation. Yet the question remains: what kind of economy is such a realignment actually producing? Is it the post-capitalist society of the multitude that conceptually opens up? Or, on the contrary, does the sponsorship of scarcity in fact enable an ever more radical neoliberal economy to continue and prosper?

The case of Vienna's social housing provision offers an excellent example of a social-democratic practice that has been dealing with scarcity and its ghosts in order to avoid its negative effects for about 100 years. It enables architects and designers to analyse and stress the emergence of specific, local scarcities, and through this to sketch an actualised model for a prospective social housing practice.

Following the pragmatic housing policy of Vienna one understands that the objective of social housing is to manage scarcity, in terms of providing affordable space to live for all, and by doing so, ultimately to get rid of social inequality. In other words, social housing is a proactive, competitive intervention into the commercial real-estate market. The practice of social housing has been constantly evolving with new challenges. In order to adapt to new forms of capitalism, to its ever-adapting scarcities, and to the changing desires of its users, the system needed, and constantly needs, to adjust. For these reasons, the model of social housing provision has to aim for constant renewal in order stay competitive to the free market and remain attractive to individuals. The imperative for renewal, however, poses a fundamental challenge to the existing system of social housing provision and production.

The emergence of the recent financial crisis is accompanied by a broadly unquestioned austerity policy in Europe. The dominant discourse uses the argument of scarcity as an economic rationale, expanding a neoliberal model into all domains of life, devaluing the role of the state in contemporary society, and delegating responsibilities to the individual within an unfettered market. This has led to the radical questioning of the welfare systems of the different nation-states in Europe and their formerly appreciated achievements such as social and affordable housing for all. These days, when it comes to social housing in particular, it is evident that neoliberal economic arguments overrule other aspects that might be otherwise relevant – ideology, social issues and concerns, or design rationale.

To the outside world, Vienna appears like an isolated island with a population that is fortunate enough to benefit from a welfare state that remains intact. Social housing is evenly distributed in the city's landscape, levelling out inequalities not only in a social, but also in a spatial sense, resulting in very

The sheer amount of public and social housing in Vienna directly influences the private market; it keeps the quality of housing relatively high, and the prices for rent relatively low.

The roof terrace of the Bremer Stadtmusikanten social housing scheme is a collective, semi-public space with a large lawn and a swimming pool.

little socio-spatial segregation and only modest changes in rent between one district of the city and another. There is enough affordable accommodation for a large portion of the population; the municipality actually owns 27 per cent of the city's housing stock, and indirectly controls and influences another 21 per cent, which is owned by limited-profit housing developers, resulting in a so-called 'integrated market'. This means that social housing is not considered to be a supplementary, discrete market for a specific user group, such as 'the poor', but rather that social housing in Vienna competes with the free market for the same share of potential clients.

The sheer amount of public and social housing in Vienna directly influences the private market; it keeps the quality of housing relatively high, and the prices for rent relatively low. Nobody within the democratic landscape openly questions the system of housing provision; on the contrary, stakeholders would only affirm and herald housing provision in Vienna, as does the popular discourse of the city's newspapers and magazines. Finally, politicians widely understand the provision of social housing across the Austrian capital as an instrument to counter economic crisis and to avoid scarcity – or even to annul it.

Yet, despite this comforting picture telling us that Vienna's social housing provision is almost all right, the system faces profound challenges that directly relate to the shifting, altering and emerging of new scarcities. First, access rules for social housing are in reality excluding various groups of society who do not meet certain criteria. On the one hand, an ever-growing part of the population, low-income or people that work in precarious conditions, is gradually being excluded from social housing. On the other hand, groups with a migration background are not granted access; this produces a 'scarcity of accessible affordable space'. Secondly, social housing in Vienna is provided by a centralised, highly regulated and bureaucratic apparatus. With a tendency to suppress processes of self-actualisation, these central systems have

Adolf Krischanitz, Hermann Czech and Werner Neuwirth with the EBG housing association, Wohnen Am Mühlgrund, Vienna, 2011
Adolf Krischanitz's take on the theme of 'housing the generations' is to group three different-sized units in two rows along a collective courtyard. Additionally, extra-small ateliers are placed on the rooftop. The units' interconnectedness allows for many combinations of diverse living situations.

produced a 'scarcity of participation'. Its opaque decision processes are based on expert opinions and political directives, which creates a peculiar climate of dependency for the tenants. And thirdly, the current financial crisis, and the accompanying European-wide call for austerity measures, introduces a 'constructed scarcity' into a seemingly functioning housing system, by asserting that the only way out of the financial crisis is to spare public money and cut back subsidies, thus finally attacking the very core of social housing. This attitude is the very opposite to the introduction in the 1920s of special housing taxes in order to initiate the system in the first place.
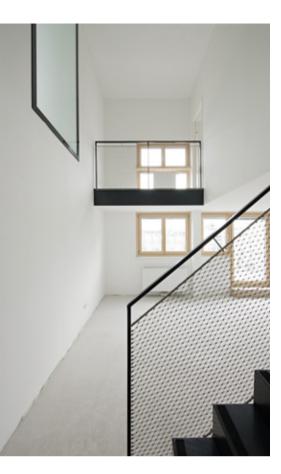
The reactions to these challenges taken up by Vienna's municipality have been manifold. Where other cities decided to sell off their housing stock, Vienna has kept its *Gemeindebauten* and sustained its power over the provision by fundamentally restructuring the housing production. A liberalised model based on regulated competition has been in place since 1995 in Vienna, ensuring

Hermann Czech's interior is an elaborate and precise design that allows, for example, two apartments to be connected with one another (as shown here). The extra-high ceiling of the living spaces also allows the installation of galleries.

high-quality standards and relatively low rent levels. In recent years, projects have been commissioned with the intent to investigate and research the possibilities of cost reduction, to produce affordable housing for lower-income groups without changing the current scheme of production and its routines in order to counter the scarcity of accessible affordable space.

As part of a wider strategy to move neighbourhood management towards a more service-orientated provision, the city has called for referenda on popular themes, such the reintroduction of caretakers for the public housing schemes in 2010. In addition, housing projects themed as 'co-housing' projects have been introduced. Both these moves are designed to create an atmosphere of participation. And finally, in early 2012, the city introduced an initiative to make up for cutbacks in the housing budget demanded by austerity policy. This creates a one-off private-public partnership financing scheme outside the established model of social housing and without its rigid quality and rental price

control. The initiative is thus ultimately subsidising the free market and extends the process of liberalisation that began in the 1990s.

For architects and designers, the question is of course how the institutional framing of social housing production results in particular spatial organisations and tangible architecture. The recent model of social housing provision has yielded some highly interesting architectural projects that are in various ways acting intelligently within the system, applying its complex mechanisms in creative ways and by doing so altering and shifting its otherwise predetermined technocratic results. ARTEC's Bremer Stadtmusikanten housing scheme (2009), PPAG Architects' Wohnen am Park (also 2009) and, more recently, Rüdiger Lainer's Kagraner Spange and Czech, Krischanitz and Neuwirth's Wohnen am Mühlgrund projects (both 2011) are four exemplary cases that exemplify different approaches to exhaust the constraints. These recently completed projects refer to conditions and times before the cutbacks, rooted in an

economy of growth. Their focus thus does not yet reflect programmes of austerity, but rather a discourse on differentiation, the multiplicity of lifestyles, of individualisation, diversification and change. Nevertheless, they mirror what is possible within a budget that was already tight, and within conditions of regulatory scarcity.

Especially when one considers the predicted population growth of Vienna,[2] the question of course is how the system of housing can be reshaped so as to contribute to economic stability, resilience and the necessary constant reorganisation. And also how to rebuild a rather hierarchic system of housing provision to become a truly democratic organisation, not giving way to a neoliberal practice and the imperative of austerity, but instead keeping up the qualities that made it strong in the first place – affordability, communality, solidarity. ⌂

Notes
1. The research of this text has been made possible through the HERA/ESF-funded research project SCIBE – Scarcity and Creativity in the Built Environment – Modelling Vienna.
2. Vienna's population is predicted to grow by 11 per cent until 2030. Statistik Austria: www.statistik.at/web_de/dynamic/statistiken/bevoelkerung/demographische_prognosen/058453.