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WIENER WERKBUNDSEIDLUNG
Vienna Housing Strategies after the Collapse of the Austrian Empire
SOCIAL HOUSING IN WIEN, 1920.

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SETTLERS MOVEMENT AND HOUSING POLICY

After the collapse of the Austrian Empire, Austria became a small and economically weak country. The biggest part of the Market for the Austrian industry was now abroad, the administration way too big for the remaining tiny country. Beside that, the capital was flooded with thousands of refugees and migrants from the lost parts of the empire. This disastrous situation in combination with the voting rights for women, brought the socialist party in power. Since that time and until today, Vienna is ruled by the same party, only interrupted during the fascist period.

The housing situation for the poor and most of the workers was disastrous even during the monarchy. Only few charity projects were realized and some rare entrepreneurs invested in housing projects for their employees. Most of the lower classes lived under precarious circumstances in speculative tenement buildings called „Zinskasernen“. These buildings offered tiny apartments of 20 to 40 square meters to whole families and were often shared with the widespread „Bettgeher“, people that rented a bed during the time it was not used by others. These apartments consisted of one room and sometimes a kitchen while water supply was to be found at the “Bassena” on the corridor. These apartments, about 400.000 in 1917, lacked ventilation, natural and even electric light as well as running water. Half of the one-room apartments did not even have a kitchen. The apartments were ranged along corridors that followed the external courtyard wall and to which all the apartments opened. The kitchens had windows opening only to the corridor and had no direct natural light nor ventilation. The toilets, arranged in groups of two or four on the courtyard side of these tenements had to be used by the occupants of several apartments and could only be accessed from these corridors as well.

As a result of the dramatic increase of poor population together with the lack of investment (in any field but especially) in affordable housing, two main directions developed after 1919 to solve this problem:

1st:

The settlers' movement, a grassroots movement organized by homeless people that invaded land, similar to the development of favelas in Brazil.

2nd:

The social housing program in big blocks, more close to the ideas of the socialist party about the lifestyle in a new democratic and equal society, lead by the workers.

These two opposing approaches I will later present by two representative projects, the „Karl Marx Hof“ (1926-30) and the „Werkbundsiedlung“ (1930).

First I would like to highlight the political and strategic positions of these two opposing movements:

The Settlers Movement started „wild“ by an initiative of people building up small cottages or shelters and gardens for small scale farming in the western suburbs of Vienna in 1918. The nowadays protected forest, the „Wienerwald“, faced illegal harvesting after the first world-war, due to a lack of food and firewood. This area was also the one chosen for the first Viennese „Favelas“. In 1920 one of the gardens previously owned by the Habsburg family, the „Lainzer Tiergarten“, was occupied by former soldiers as illegal settlers. Soon others appeared and supported each other, finally also supported by the socialist city government. Although the socialist city administration opposed the „bourgeois“ values of the settlers movement (house, garden, individual ownership) at first, under the influence of the garden city movement in Britain and Germany, and following huge demonstrations a municipal settlement office was established in 1921. The socialist mayor Jakob Reumann was one of the strongest supporters of this movement. Not knowing which house would become theirs at the end, the settlers' cooperatives invested 1000 to 3000 working hours per person in the settlement.



Figures 01 and 02. Source: www.dasrotewien.at

Figure 01 shows some of the illegal settlements in the suburbs of Vienna, figure 02 shows the first ever Viennese "Gemeindebau".

After a while most of these organizations became official cooperatives (like GESIBA, still one of the big players in affordable housing in Vienna).

GESIBA, established in 1921 and originally called „Gemeinwirtschaftliche Siedlungs- und Baustoffanstalt” could be translated as „Serviço público para habitação e materiais de construção”. (I will show a project we did with them at the end of my presentation) and were supported not only by the official government of Vienna, but also by architects like Adolf Loos, who was the architectural director of the municipal settlement office. But the engagement of Loos and his colleagues faced both lack of understanding by the settlers as well as the bureaucracy of the community officials. Among the most well known architects involved with the movement were Adolf Loos, Josef Frank and Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, all of them joining the Werkbund later. The settlers' movement was quite successful, building about 15.000 units in about 50 settlements.

SUPERBOLCK VERSUS SETTLEMENTS

Among politicians, architects and housing experts, the question of high-rise versus low-rise development was a central issue already at that time. The discussion was lead in debates, lectures, newspapers and other publications. Between supporters and opponents of the two different concepts – apartment block versus single-family house with garden – the debate became increasingly polarized in Vienna, as it became more and more evident that the city administration favored building apartment blocks. The decision was made in view of the lack of cheap land, high development costs, absence of public transportation and infrastructure and the higher construction costs of the garden city next to the superblock. One of the major influences on this housing policy decision was Karl Seitz, who had replaced Jakob Reumann as the mayor of Vienna in 1923.

KARL MARX HOF

One of the best known examples of the Vienna Superblock is the famous Karl Marx Hof.

Build between 1926 and 1930 and designed by Carl Ehn, a former student of Otto Wagner. It contained 1.382 units for about 5000 inhabitants at 156.000 m² and a lot of infrastructure, like two central laundries, two bath houses, two kinder-gardens, a library and ambulatories as well as a pharmacy, postal office and coffee shops. From 1929 on the city even offered assistance for interior design. In 1934 the Karl Marx Hof was the center of resistance against austrian fascism and by that established his nickname as a „fortress of socialism”.



Figures 03. Source: www.dasrotewein.at

Figures 04. Source: www.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons.

Figure 03: Publication printed on the occasion of the completion of Karl Marx Hof,
figure 04: Karl Marx Hof main gates.

Several improvements have been made at the Karl Marx Hof. From 1982 until 1992 the building was thoroughly renovated. Thermal improvements of windows and facades as well as new water tubes and the implementation of 50 elevators increased the comfort for the inhabitants. Some of the smallest apartments have been reconfigured to bigger ones, as private bathrooms had to be added. Today Karl Marx Hof has about 3000 inhabitants in 1255 apartments.

The recent renovation of Karl Marx Hof started 2010 and will last until 2019, continuous maintenance keeps the standard of the building up to date.

WERKBUNDSIEDLUNG

The second strategy, the settlers' movement, became less important after a while, although many architects contributed to this movement, influenced by the concepts of the garden cities. But for some years, around 1925, the government invested and supported the „Gartenstadtsiedlung“.

Architect Karl Schartelmüller realized one of the most sophisticated projects in this period together with the already mentioned GESIBA, the settlement „Siedlung Lockerwiese“ (1923-30)

At that time the involvement of the settlers in the construction of the buildings was no longer welcome. Also decorative elements were diminished during the construction period, due to less financial resources caused by the world economic crisis.

The problematic housing situation in Austria forced a lot of architects, especially those under the influence of the modernist movement, to contribute in solving needs following the crisis.

One project, with a different economical approach, was the building exhibition of the „Werkbundsiedlung”.

The idea of the „Werkbundsiedlung”, a building exposition in Vienna, originally planned at the Wienerberg in the south of Vienna, close to the famous „George Washington Hof”, was moved to the actual site by Josef Frank.

The Austrian Werkbund went through two main phases. The first was the participation in the Werkbund Exhibition in Cologne in 1914, followed by a long period of stagnation until the end of the 1920s, when the construction of the Vienna Werkbund Estate began. Josef Frank, who was the only Austrian invited to participate in the Stuttgart Werkbund Exhibition in 1927, became the responsible architect in the Austrian Werkbund and became the key person for the „Werkbundsiedlung” in Vienna

Between 1927 and 1932 six Werkbund estates were built: The famous Weissenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart (1927), Brno (1928), Breslau (1929), Zurich (1931) and Vienna together with Prague (both 1932). These projects can not be compared easily since they were pursuing different ideas. The Vienna Werkbund exhibition in 1932 represented the realization of a utopian project, built at a time when political and economic reasons actually no longer supported this kind of architecture and lifestyle based on the concept of individual freedom.



Figure 05. Source: Site of the Werkbundsiedlung 2015

Furthermore the economic situation had changed dramatically due to the world economic crisis. Most of the houses could not be sold as intended.

Finally the city of Vienna took over the whole project except the few buildings that could be sold.

The Austrian Werkbund began to fall apart shortly after the exhibition. Josef Frank went into exile in Sweden and the Werkbund was finally dissolved by the Nazis in 1938.

RESTORATION OF THE WERKBUNDSEIDLUNG

The following detailed Information about the restoration of the Werkbundsiedlung by PGOOD architects (Azita PRASCHL-GOODARZI and Martin PRASCHL), winner of the Vienna Urban Renewal Prize 2013 is mostly based on a text by the architects.

After a European wide call for tenders, P.GOOD Architects started the general planning to restore and renovate 48 residential buildings in the Viennese "Werkbundsiedlung". The entire project will be undertaken in four stages, and will be completed in 2018. In the first phase, which we will focus on now, three buildings by Gerrit Rietveld and one by Josef Hoffmann have been restored among 37 others, most of them inhabited.

Restoration Objectives:

The main goal is to preserve the qualities of the original structures, and to bring the 48 buildings and external areas up to contemporary and damage-free standards at the same time. Particular attention was paid to the Werkbundsiedlung as a significant ensemble of modernist architecture in Austria. As much as possible of the existing structure has been preserved and protected for the future. In many cases, the original building materials had to be uncovered from over-plastering or different coverings. The visible surfaces have been restored with the same materials and techniques as have been used during the original construction in 1932. After the renovation the whole ensemble should look like in the early 30ties and not like newly build in 2016.

Restoration Measures:

According to the Architects the restoration measures included refurbishing and partially exposing the original plaster surfaces; retrofitting windows and doors; renovating floors, walls and ceilings; remodeling bathrooms; reinstalling plumbing and electrical systems; repairing banisters and handrails; as well as repairing outdoor areas including fences and gates. In the houses designed by Gerrit Rietveld, variations of the ground floor layout have been implemented, based on the original designs that have been found in sketches and letters by Rietveld - but which had not been carried out in 1932.

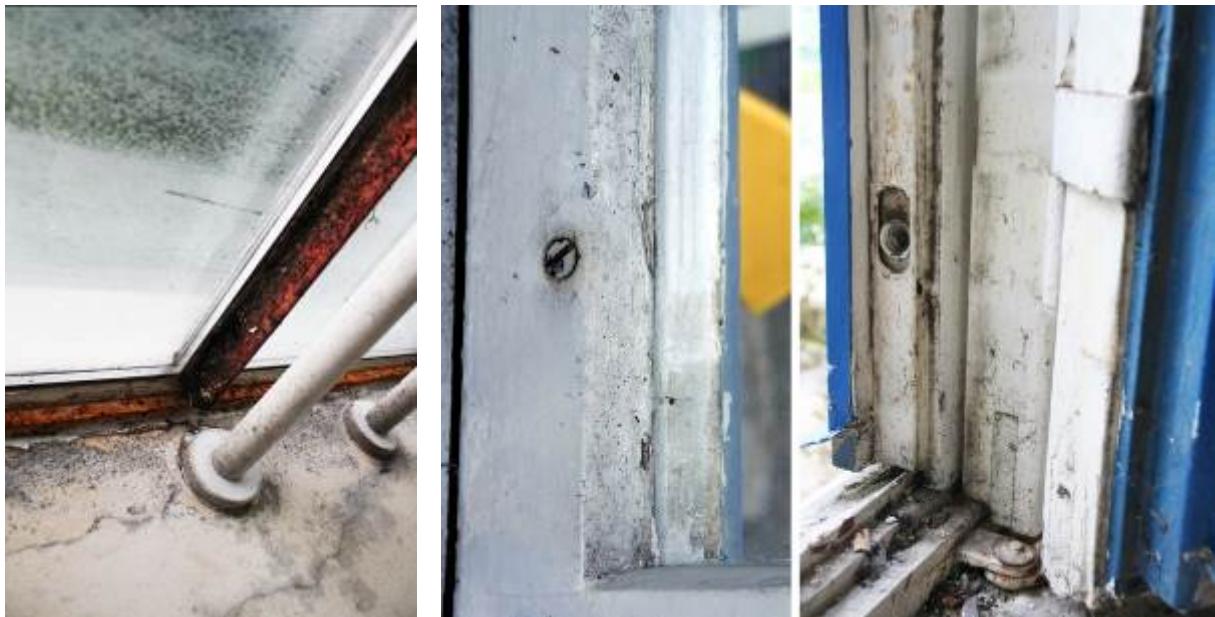


Figure 06 and 07. Source: P.GOOD Architects, Vienna.
Several damages at the Rietveld houses

Thermal Retrofit:

When improving thermal efficiency the historical substance has to be respected. Proportions and openings of the buildings are carefully arranged and can be destroyed easily by the application of insulation materials. The planning team therefore developed a set of combined measures which reduce heating costs by approximately 50% without the need for insulating facades and simultaneously avoiding condensation in the apartments. These measures included the insulation of roofs and terraces as well as the below-ground walls; retrofitting the existing windows with high quality thermal K-glass and silicone seals and installing a heat recovery ventilation system (controlled ventilation) together with high efficiency gas condensing boilers and drainage measures.

These measures led to the following results:

Hoffmann House: 160.59 Kwh l m²y (from 292.07 to 131.49 Kwh l m²pa)

Rietveld House: 95.43 kWh l m²y (from 197.54 to 102.11 kWh l m²pa)



Figure 08, 09 and 10. Source: P.GOOD Architects, Vienna.
Houses at Veitingerstrasse after renovation was completed

P.GOOD Architects are supported by a team of professional consultants for metal, wood and plaster restoration and specialists in building physics, electrical engineering and building services. The AZW, the Austrian Center of Architecture, the Vienna Museum and the Architects of the first renovation in 1983, Adolf Krischanitz and Otto Kapfinger have been involved in the process as consultants. The whole process was supervised by the Austrian Federal Heritage Office, the „Bundesdenkmalamt“. Discussions about the living conditions in a heritage have been controversial during the planning process. It was never intended by the architects to build an ever lasting monument but a comfortable living environment in functional small and affordable buildings. This approach led to a certain tolerance for improvements, like additional

bathrooms on the ground floor and variations of the floor plan design. A further challenge of this project was that most of the units are occupied residential properties and the aim was to bridge the interests of heritage conservation with the needs of the residents. Therefore, individual solutions, even temporary windows and other coordinated measures have been tailored for each house. For the remaining 11 houses, the restoration will take approximately two more years. By now, the Viennese conservation society „Wiener Substanzerhaltungsgesellschaft & Co KG (WISEG)“, founded by the city specifically for the repair work of historic properties is in charge of the Werkbundsiedlung. The Company is responsible for those buildings owned by the city of Vienna that need special caretaking and have been build without subsidy. 84 buildings, half of them under heritage protection and mostly from the 18th century are in the responsibility of the company. These apartments are rented out for prices much higher than the average rent for social housing in Vienna. It is the „luxury“ department of Viennas social housing.

THE “NEW SETTLERS MOVEMENT” IN VIENNA IN THE EARLY 2000

Since the fall of the iron curtain in 1989, Vienna switched from a shrinking to an increasingly fast growing city. Like in the early years of the last century the discussion about “low density” versus “high density” arose again. Like a century ago the strong wish of the Viennese population for single family houses caused about 5000 wealthier people to move to suburban regions. Most of these regions are outside the city boundaries and the taxes paid by those are missing in the cities budget and cause increasing traffic. To offer a denser but still “green” housing the city of Vienna reinvented the term settlers’ movement “Siedlerbewegung” for a program of subsidized housing positioned somewhere between a garden city and an allotment garden. 750.000 square meters for subsidized housing have been used for this kind of buildings especially designed for young families with children. According to the regulations for subsidized housing these projects had to be approved by certain commissions and a competition had to take place.

Until 2006 out of 3500 planned units more than 1000 have been realized. The project I worked on with two colleagues, Claudia König and Werner Larch, was part of the settlement “Orasteig”, a Project of 440 units at about 40.000 square meters. We worked in the central part, about a third of the whole project and about 150 apartments, most of them with private green spaces, gardens or terraces, but at least balconies.



Figure 11. Source: König-Larch Architects, Vienna.
The New Settler Movement, Orasteig (GESIBA) by König-Larch and Tomaselli

The project frames a central common green space for pedestrians and cyclists with public spaces to stay on certain points, providing shadow and leisure facilities. The second path through the settlement follows a sequence of half private courtyards with communication spaces and rentable offices as well as children playgrounds and rooms (salas de festa) for the entire community. Private gardens are separated by a slightly higher level from the public and semipublic spaces and could be decorated by the inhabitants.

As we see an increase in population of Vienna today, the two main directions of solving this issue developed in the 30ies arise again.

The increasing population and the lack of infrastructure lead to the same answers as 1930, the main focus of the social housing program is oriented to blocks, being built and owned by the city of Vienna. Welcome back to 1930, lets hope at least the political consequences will be different.

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