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“Housing impacts the city – Communal Housing Politics as a Tool for Shaping the City”

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Summary

The largest portion of Vienna’s urban fabric is made up of the existing residential building stock and new housing that constitutes Vienna’s continuous spatial structure. Until quite recently, new housing was inserted – unquestioned – in the given urban structure:

- with respect to the city’s dense fabric (which to a great extent originates in the Gründerzeit era), by means of building categories, heights and frontage lines, and involving “real streets” and a network of public spaces and open spaces;
- with respect to major city expansions since the 1960s, in accordance with the living and dwelling models of postwar modernism, a new form of connection of housing and city planning incorporating the familiar forms of detached buildings, ample green and open spaces, social infrastructure and a close tie to private automobile.

The new housing itself consisted of a relatively rigorous typology of highly optimized apartment floor plans and building forms, which, because prefabricated-concrete units were employed, are, to a great degree, not adaptable.

The housing concepts and the physical forms that are the material of city planning were part of an “urban consensus” (i.e., the result of the consensus-building process), which is summarized as thesis in this report.

Transitional phase since about 1990

These *Leitbilder* of modernist city planning have been undergoing a transformation since the early 1990s, as have forms of living, working, and architecture.

In areas outside the city’s dense fabric, a great number of design models straddling the disciplines architecture and city planning are increasingly being employed. New housing construction often brings about mono-functional “islands”, “hybrids”, and new forms of green and open spaces. Correspondingly, in the absence of an apt functional mix, there is still a tendency for these to become “bedroom communities”.

In general, in larger housing complexes or areas under development, variety is achieved by enlisting a number of developer-builders and architects, but this approach often results in a somewhat vague spatial impression. It also tends to bring about a

certain paradoxical uniformity, despite – or because of – the fact that it is usually not possible to understand the origin of the different architectural forms.

Variety alone does not create urban spaces in the sense of attractive routes and safe streets conducive to walking, spending time on, or for potential informal social interaction.

Nevertheless, Vienna's housing authority has taken more significant steps toward developing new concepts and forms than the city planning department has. The four-point approach put into practice by the City of Vienna for subsidized housing constitutes a quality model that is at once differentiated and integrative, and is complemented by specialized processes and instruments (among them, the *Grundstücksbeirat* / the advisory council for housing subsidies and *Bauträgerwettbewerbe* / developers' competitions).

Urban spaces of the future

However, with regard to the urban spaces in areas under development, subsidized housing cannot, in and of itself, determine all dimensions of spatial characteristics and configurations, nor the relationship to other urban functions.

In this context, protagonists and architects – both critics and those involved in planning the housing – speak of Vienna's "*Missing Link City Planning*". In light of new expectations of and demands on designs for spaces and structures, the traditional "urban consensus", which held sway until the 1990s, can no longer do justice to the aspects that go beyond the design of housing complexes.

There is – as architects and experts assure us – a clear instrumental gap between the specifications for large-scale development (STEP, target areas, traffic concept, concepts for open spaces at a large-scale) and the concrete zoning plans and land-use plans.

New concepts and inter-phases are needed

The highly publicized program aiming – in response to the expected population growth – to achieve a general increase in density both in recently developed areas as well as in the dense fabric raises questions regarding the extent to which the future urban configurations (as far as is possible within the framework of property-ownership laws and the instruments of city planning) can seize upon other and more wide-ranging qualities, as well as new concepts and spaces.

Such a program includes, among other things, a deliberate reintroduction of urban avenues, streets and small squares, at least in the more centrally located zones of the developments, i.e. in the proximity of public transit stations, local main streets, and existing and new local centres. The anthropologist Marcel Hénaff favours the term "common space" and convincingly argues that the duality of private and public space is unsatisfactory to connote urban proximities (neighbourhood, immediate environment). He describes at a great level of detail the qualities – behavioural patterns and important spatial offerings – of this "espace commun". Consequently, for newly developed areas, the spatial elements "avenue", "street", "small square", as well as small extensions of

the street-space, again become relevant, and may, by all means, take cues from the spatial form of traditional cities.

If we proceed on the assumption that the “aesthetics”, images and atmospheres of urban space will in future represent an important factor for quality of life – both at the edges of the densely built city and in newly developed areas – “new takes” on city planning concepts are necessary, and should go considerably beyond even the most recent and ambitious development projects.

This presupposes a method beginning with images – in other words, integrative concepts for urban space and a “definition” of “elements” of urban space/geography and city planning. If such an approach is not employed at an early stage of city planning by means of a competition or cooperative procedure, we will continue to create isolated islands of housing and the attendant, somewhat diffuse urban spaces.

If the opposite applies – that the characteristics of the residential structures are an inseparable component of urban space – it will be necessary to direct renewed attention to the “interfaces” between the space associated with housing and that of the city.

One of the instrumental responses is the reintroduction of area plans (concepts for sub-areas of a city) for urban space: this means that at least for parts of districts in which more dynamism and transformation of uses is expected, concepts for urban space and for urban fabric, as well as design concepts (as were elaborated in the 1980s – corresponding to the precepts of the time – but subsequently abandoned) must be reactivated. Pertinent information and calls for area plans are also found in the STEP 2025 task-force deliberations.

These dimensions become all the more important when it comes to seeking ways to optimally use the valuable tracts of land available for new housing and – wherever possible – to achieve higher densities and efficient use of funding: an imperative due to the continued high demand for living quarters and the expenditures for the infrastructure.

On the structure of the report

Following the introduction, in Section 2 addresses a number of new parameters for housing:

- The prognoses on population growth and the programs aiming to “increase density in existing urban fabric” are briefly discussed; this report takes a critical look at the efforts to anticipate that growth with planning instruments. It calls attention to the fact that statisticians emphasize that a “prognosis” can only be considered diagnostically conclusive through 2020; the figures for dates farther in the future can only be considered a “projection”. In the present economic situation (available jobs, public spending, political parameters, and the expected strong resistance of residents to mass immigration), there is no reason to publicize this growth as an “accomplishment” and as unquestionably “advantageous” for Vienna. (Section 2.1)

- Commentary on the intermediate stage of STEP 2025, in which the intermediate versions place slightly too much emphasis on population growth, while at least as much attention should go to contribution to an idea the city aims to implement in the next ten years. (Section 2.2)
- The thesis putting forth a new form of consensus-building – both in terms of space and of built fabric – is an attempt to thematize the historical and, to this day, valid prerequisites and professional accord that precede or underpin the respective urban development projects and plans; in essence this “consensus” was thus far determined by the factuality and form of dense fabric of Gründerzeit Vienna, on the one hand, and of the city expansions in the sense of paradigms and forms of modernist city planning, on the other.
- This ties in with the thesis that since the 1990s a phase of “a new process of negotiations” in many areas – urban planning, housing, architecture – is increasingly under way relevant to urban development. The current challenges and numerous unresolved issues regarding new concepts for urban space and form stem from this. (Section 2.3)

Section 3 covers a number of “interfaces” of city space/city-building and living/housing: it proceeds on the assumption that there is an established, logical and necessary division of labour between housing and urban space/urban geography, whereby it is not clear which role city planning – as discipline – will play, but it too represents instead a crucial interface between the agenda of the housing authority and that of the city planning department.

- As a case study, the conversations with twenty prominent Viennese architects, experts and protagonists of urban development on the “Future of the City” hosted by and published in QUER – with numerous critical statements on Vienna’s city planning and on the planning instruments – are taken as point of departure to thematize a broader and also critical discourse in Vienna that does in fact exist regarding the political issues surrounding city planning and urban development. Here too there is a gap between the informal discussions and scattered, yet trenchant opinions and criticism, on the one hand, and the absence of a public forum in which specialists meet at regular intervals, on the other. (Section 3.2)

Two major themes of city space or city building relate to streets and small squares as the fundamental urban building blocks, which – in combination with shops, services and restaurants – are essential for informal communication, identifying with a place (new forms of neighbourhoods), and atmospheres both in the densely built parts of the city, and in the new areas beyond it.

This also includes the means to enhance and increase the density of (decentralized) local centres. These traditional elements of the city are the basis for “common” urban space.