



SOCIAL HOUSING, WHERE ARE YOU HEADED?

Conference Ambassador Report by Livia Regen on:

Dialogue Session 599: Making transitions happen – the Viennese experience: Innovations for the future of social housing (IBA Vienna). (20th of August 2020, 17.30-19.00)

Panelists: Kurt Hofstetter, Susanne Giesecke, Mark de Hoop and Klaus Kubeczko

All of us would most probably agree that housing is a basic need. Many agree that it is a human right. But there's disagreement about who should take care of providing housing, who should have a say in the design of housing projects, and who should own the buildings and housing facilities. Similarly, opinions differ on what social housing means and who should have access to it. That it's core to continue posing these questions as researchers and citizens becomes clear when looking at developments and trends in social housing.

At the IST 2020, researchers and policy-makers discussed recent and historical trends in social housing both in Vienna and the Netherlands. Discussants of the session "Innovations for the future of social housing (IBA Vienna)" were key panellist Kurt Hofstetter (Coordinator IBA Vienna), Susanne Giesecke, Mark de Hoop and Klaus Kubeczko. IBA Vienna, the International Building Exhibition Vienna 2022, is a project by the City of Vienna that aims at developing solutions to current challenges in housing. Its focus are forms of "new social housing". What social housing ends up looking like depends to a large degree on laws and politics, but also on the importance that a city attributes to providing housing for more vulnerable members of society. Finally, broader economic trends such as waves of **privatisation** that many countries experienced in the 1980s influence the provisioning of public housing.

When understanding housing as a human right, it is clear that housing must not be subject to markets and speculation but should be publicly provided. That 60 % of a city's population live in publicly funded housing (as is the case in Vienna) is by no means to be taken for granted. This circumstance is rooted in the historical development of the city: From 1918 to 1934, politicians in **Red Vienna**¹ made some choices against trends of privatisation by retaining public ownership of housing firms, building firms and renovation firms.

This has resulted in a situation in which over two thirds of Vienna's population would qualify to live in social housing, and in which postcodes hardly reveal the level of income. On the base of this social

¹ The **Red Vienna** refers to the period between 1918 and 1934 when Vienna was governed by Social Democrats who renewed the tax system, which allowed them to fund large public housing projects.

innovation in the early 20th century and with 115 currently ongoing social housing projects in 9 districts, the City of Vienna continues to provide publicly funded housing with a range of innovations.

High up on the list for the past few years have been innovations related to climate change mitigation but also to the design of the neighbourhood. One such innovation are so-called new social neighbourhoods, which are neighbourhoods that combine living with spaces that fulfil other needs, respond to societal challenges and ensure a high quality of living standards. For example, these mixed-use spaces combine living with e.g. grocery stores, schools, repair shops etc. With regards to responses to climate change, the planned Quartier an der Schanze or Biotope City Wienerberg include extensive green spaces as well as green facades and rooftops, and concepts to reduce car parking space. Other innovations include modular housing, i.e. houses that can be reassembled to fit changing family sizes.

That it's not common that a government provides social housing with such continuity becomes evident in the example of the Netherlands. There, from the 1980s onwards a steady decline of social housing occurred due to privatisation. Social housing became a service only applicable to a small proportion of the population (i.e. the most vulnerable of citizens). While in Amsterdam still 50 % of the population live in social housing, in the rest of the Netherlands social housing is on the decline. It is in this context that the social innovation of **housing cooperatives** emerged in the Netherlands and became a legal format in 2014.

That a legal framework was necessary to cement new forms of housing shows the relevance of multi-level governance for questions of housing, i.e. the political decision-making and interaction on an international, national and municipal level. On the panel, the speakers agreed that the EU's housing policies are shaped by a **neoliberal** spirit, promoting competition and markets as means to regulate housing prices. This stands in contrast to efforts often made on a city government level, where not only the relevance of housing as a basic need and right is acknowledged, but also local needs are better understood. Thus, Kurt Hofstetter stresses the relevance of more autonomy for municipalities to plan social housing and adequately respond to local needs.

As mentioned above, the social housing sector is full of innovations: of a social, technological and ecological kind. What can still be improved, however, are social innovations concerning civil-society and neighbourhood engagement. To be part of the planning process, to make choices about the future living situation and neighbourhood design, and to make a house into one's home is central to good social housing and easily overlooked in the planning process. Similarly overlooked is often the collaboration between different departments in the city government.

If you are curious to learn more about social housing in Vienna, check out the IBA's website and related events: <https://www.iba-wien.at/en/service>