

For the People, By the People

The Emergence of a Gemeindebauten Building Type

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A stroll through the streets of Vienna brings attention to the large, aesthetically varied structures dominating the urban landscape. Still used by a large percentage of the Viennese population today, the gemeindebauten- residential buildings built by a municipality- of Vienna make up what many consider to be the most successful housing solution ever constructed. The primary purpose of the gemeindebauten was to solve the crippling housing crisis that overwhelmed Vienna immediately after the first World War. The underlying motive was to present the people with a positive, steadfast symbol of the Social Democratic Party that demonstrated the party's ideals in a way that would assure the working class that they were to be treated with consideration and respect. This was done by building structures for working-class families and displaced individuals such that the production of the monumental housing projects used the labor of the laypeople, creating a sense of ownership while also building to their needs by incorporating art, communal facilities and access to public means of transportation into the construction of the projects. The ideology that the people inhabiting the gemeindebauten should be put at the forefront of the building design strategy is recognizable in many of the large gemeindebauten built between the years 1925 and 1930, including the Winarsky Hof, Karl-Marx Hof, Friedrich-Engels Platz, and most notably, the Rabenhof.

The later part of the nineteenth century saw a Vienna ravaged by a wild river that often flooded, making near-by land unusable, speckled with areas that were underdeveloped and poorly serviced by public transit. As the government called for an urban design plan that would act as a solution for the unruly river and inaccessible urban sections of the Vienna, people flocked to the city despite these issues in search of jobs and Vienna's population surged, making it one of the most populated cities in the

world in less than 25 years. The end of World War I and break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire brought soldiers and civil servants home while also creating a refugee crisis as people from Poland, Ukraine, and Hungary fled to Austria, worsening the preexisting housing crisis and sending the country to the brink of famine. The people of Vienna desperately searched for refuge from the devastating housing shortage. They built shacks out of crates, boxes, and even trees felled from the protected Vienna Woods, sent their children away to the Netherlands to save them from starvation and grew produce in public parks. The government had no choice but to allow this behavior because they had no means to address the problem in a systematic way. In May of 1919, an election was held where everyone- regardless of gender- was encouraged to vote, and the Social Democratic Party came into power in Vienna. ¹

The Social Democrats immediately set to work solving the city's pressing problems. Unoccupied buildings were seized and used to house the people who had previously called makeshift shanties home. The city began to stabilize as people moved off the street and a campaign was started to reform education, health care and housing as well as help feed the people. It soon became clear that new housing methods would need to be developed and built, so research was done to find out what the people that would occupy the dwellings actually needed. With the working class making up the majority of the city's population, the Red Vienna administration was faced with essentially rebuilding the city as they tackled the task of creating housing for over 200,000 people. One strategy was to provide the people of the working class with

¹ Bauer-Manhart, Ingeborg. "Austria's Political Parties and Their History." Austria's Political Parties and Their History. Accessed June 20, 2016. <https://www.wien.gv.at/english/history/commemoration/parties.html>.

materials to build their own houses, allowing them to labor together to build housing units in what became known as the “settler’s movement.” This rebuilding strategy shifted to include larger buildings that required more careful coordination of construction as architects were brought in to help design gemeindebauten across the city and used labor intensive techniques to create jobs, bringing down the unemployment rate while adding a sense of pride and ownership to the project that resulted in a high satisfaction rate among the working-class dwellers.

The designers of the gemeindebauten took a wide range of approaches to the project. Though the buildings don’t seem to resemble one another in any way besides their monumental size, close inspection reveals similar underlying characteristics. Many architects of gemeindebauten were pupils at the Imperial Academy before the war and studied under Otto Wagner, who had previously provided solutions to the urban issues that plagued Vienna at the beginning of the twentieth century with his design of an underground inner-city train, which solved transportation issues and provided access to areas of the city that were previously unreachable. It is natural to infer that many of the designers who studied with Wagner were inspired by their mentor’s work. Much of the Red Vienna development seems to take after Wagner’s design concepts presented in *The Development of a Great City*, in which the city grows from preexisting components and encompasses modern elements while considering expected future expansion.² Wagner suggests that a great city plan is one which includes a main thoroughfare flanked by shops displaying artistic wares, strollable streets, good restaurants, open squares with monuments, transportation, a street cleaning system and acceptable living

² Wagner, Otto. "The Development of a Great City." First published in 1912, 485-500.

accommodations.³ Wagner also asserts that an impeccably designed city may need to be divided into wards for regulation purposes, each with gardens, playgrounds, schools, churches, traffic routes, municipality buildings, commerce and libraries as well as public facilities like laundry and health care services. ⁴ Instead of sectioning off parts of the city into wards as Wagner suggests, the architects designing the Red Vienna housing projects used the *gemeindebauten* as a sort of ward of its own. By building on such a huge scale, large *gemeindebauten* housed enough people to merit their own schools, health care clinics, shops, day care centers, laundry facilities, parks, churches, access points to public transportation and other public amenities, just as Wagner suggested be present in the city wards. The use of the perimeter block building method sectioned the housing off from the city in a way that created an obvious division without isolating the people and services from the outside. This allowed for the people of each *gemeindebau* to network and form committees to regulate activity inside the border of their building without being cut off from social activity elsewhere in the city.

The Red Vienna architects and planners allowed the needs and desires of the people to guide their work so that the modern city was shaped by the people who lived in it. Achleitner mused that the success of the *gemeindebauten* stemmed from the way in which they acted as reflections of Austrian society and culture in an extremely functional way.⁵ The *gemeindebauten* built from 1925 to 1930 followed many of Wagner's suggestions for developing a great city and were designed in a manner that

³ Wagner, Otto. "The Development of a Great City." First published in 1912, 485-500.

⁴ Wagner, Otto. "The Development of a Great City." First published in 1912, 485-500.

⁵ Blau, Eve. *The Architecture of Red Vienna, 1919-1934*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.

made people feel proud of the project while also refraining from using the design to make class distinctions, creating housing that promoted equality and provided everything the working class needed for the first time.

The Rabenhof is an excellent example of how the Social Democratic Party successfully accomplished producing a gemeindebau typology that catered to the needs of the people. Designed by Schmid and Aichinger and built from 1925 to 1928, the Rabenhof was a huge building made up of over 1,000 apartments and housed approximately 4,500 people. (Figure 1) The building was initially called Austerlitzhof, after a prominent socialist poet and politician-as many of the gemeindebauten are named after significant artists and forward thinkers- but the name was changed in 1934 following the February revolution. Now, the current name of the building is proudly displayed in large red letters across its side, a feature shared by the majority of gemeindebauten. Built with a perimeter block design, the Rabenhof includes arches that span city roads permitting through-traffic, indicating public movement and incorporating the building into the city. (Figure 2) The structure aimed at addressing the needs of the people down to the smallest detail. There were a variety of apartment types to choose from based on the size of each family, and many apartments were single-loaded to allow for cross ventilation and avoid the spread of disease. The design of each apartment encouraged individualization and beautification, as seen even from outside on the railings of the balconies, where holders for flower pots were built into the lower section of each banister. (Figure 3) Due to the Rabenhof's close proximity to the U-bahn line, residents found that traveling around the city to get to work or make visits was easy- a welcome relief for the working-class families who lived there and no longer had

to struggle just to get from one place to another. The communal facilities at the Rabenhof were extensive and child-oriented- another characteristic that helped parents find and keep jobs. The facilities included four classrooms, a kindergarten, children's dental clinic, health services, day care center, public library, central laundry room, and even a theater. The incorporation of these services into the design of the gemeindebau displays the importance placed on education and health care by the Social Democratic Party. Children were being taught at kindergarten and had access to endless knowledge through the library services and were guaranteed to be in good health due to the dental and health clinics. Not only did having these services create even more jobs, it also ensured that the children were being taken care of and the adults in the family were able to work and provide for them. The significance placed upon bringing art to the working class is also evident at the Rabenhof. Sculptures punctuate the public gardens and can even be found in the playground area of the kindergarten, communicating to residents that they are worthy of having access to art, something that was previously a privilege solely for the elite. (Figure 4) The theater was a unique aspect of the Rabenhof, offering art in the form of acting and music. (Figure 5) The space also doubled as a public meeting area for the residents to hold community discussions and council meetings. Today, the Rabenhof even has its own website to help maintain the space and manage council affairs. The massiveness of this gemeindebau, in addition to its many useful public spaces and communal facilities of the building type made the Rabenhof an excellent place to make connections, raise a family, and bask in the comfort and support that comes with being a part of a community.

The element of social comfort present in the Rabenhof can also be found in the other large gemeindebauten built during the same time period. The Winarsky Hof, which began construction in 1924 and was completed in 1925, demonstrated the communal environment that was developing in Vienna at the time as a result of the Red Vienna housing project due to the fact that its design was a collaborative project undertaken by a number of significant architects, including Frank, Strnad, Wlach, Schuster, Loos, Libotzky, Dimhuber, and Behrens, many of whom were students of Wagner with international reputations and close connections to the development of modernist ideas in European architecture. (Figure 6) The concept of architects working together to design housing solutions ensures that more ideas be incorporated into the design process, allowing for a better chance that the needs of the people be addressed. The Winarsky Hof differs from the Rabenhof and other gemeindebauten of the same typology because it was initiated by the Austrian Society for Settlements and Allotment Gardens and embodied the Garden City idea of suburban development that allows individuals to have their own gardens or yards, rather than enclosing green space at the center of the perimeter block. Another significant element of the Winarsky Hof is the incorporation of the gear-shaped clock. This simple feature adds beauty and acts as art in a utilitarian style of which Adolf Loos would be proud. The clock was an essential tool of the period, as watches were expensive and would not have been worn to do work, so presenting the time for all to see as a part of the building itself was an ingenious aspect of the design that was not only useful but also another example of how the architects of the building were designing with the needs of the working class people in mind.

Perhaps the most famous and recognizable gemeindebau is the Karl Marx Hof, designed by Ehn and under construction from 1926 to 1930. (Figure 7) The Karl Marx Hof took on an unusual shape of a perimeter block design with a façade that was 1.2 kilometers long and demonstrated the importance of art to the public through the sculptures that line the building's sides. Only eighteen percent of the Karl Marx Hof's area was built up despite its large size, leaving room for green space and facilities that included a pharmacy, state health insurance office, daycare center, youth home, post office, public baths and even an advice bureau for interior design, which helped residents best utilize the space, making it seem larger and more like home. The most significant aspect of the Karl Marx Hof is that access to the complex is obtained through entrances from the road, emphasizing just how important having direct access to transportation was to the workers who lived there. The Karl Marx Hof housed many of the workers who built railways, so Ehn's design made it possible for them to outfit their gemeindebau with their own transportation demonstrated by the fact that it is the final stop on the U-bahn.

Significant due to its immense size, the Friedrich Engels –Platz, designed by Perco and built starting in 1930, contained 2,300 apartments and housed 10, 000 residents. (Figure 8) It had a huge courtyard and many unique facilities including a pool for children, workshops, public gathering houses, emergency station, pharmacy, public kitchen and mother's service bureau. This gemeindebau has a particularly strong sense of community due to the sheer number of inhabitants and their need to coexist peacefully as well as through the types of public facilities offered.

The layout of this gemeindebauten building type differed greatly from other housing projects built around the same time. In addition to the perimeter block housing type of many successful gemeindebauten was the German “siedlung” housing type which consisted of low rise row house-type dwellings that were generally suburban and smaller in scale, modeled after the Garden City plan rather than taking inspiration from the Ville Radieuse as many of the large gemeindebauten did.⁶ Frank was a supporter of this building style and his 1931 Leopoldine-Glocken Hof was an excellent example of some of the ideals that werkbundsiedlung builders aimed for. (Figure 9) Frank was not concerned with building largely or for a huge number of people; instead his goal was to make a fewer number of people very content with their living situation. Like the gemeindebauten, the Leopoldine-Glocken Hof was of the perimeter block layout, but it was modernized by the use of flat roofs and light pastel colors to break up the façade and add a touch of homey individuality. The werkbundsiedlung housing is the result of the desire to build outward, while the gemeindebauten resulted from the concept of vertical building that combined public spaces with private dwelling spaces derived from Le Corbusier’s Ville Contemporaine.⁷ Wagner believed that developing cities should “encourage apartment houses of many stories” in order to proliferate land value and optimize the use of available urban space.⁸ As a result, not only were many of the gemeindebauten built to be many stories high, they were also built to accommodate commercial space on the street level.

⁶ Stuhlpfarrer, Anna. "Werkbundsiedlung Wien." Werkbundsiedlung Wien. Accessed June 20, 2016. <http://www.werkbundsiedlung-wien.at/en/background/the-housing-programme-of-red-vienna/>.

⁷ Stuhlpfarrer, Anna. "Werkbundsiedlung Wien." Werkbundsiedlung Wien. Accessed June 20, 2016. <http://www.werkbundsiedlung-wien.at/en/background/the-housing-programme-of-red-vienna/>.

⁸ Wagner, Otto. "The Development of a Great City." First published in 1912, 485-500.

The perimeter block design of the Rabenhof and other gemeindebauten of the same typology are very different from the superblock layout observed in Zagreb. Le Corbusier's concept for the superblock is closely followed in the design of the housing projects in Zagreb, which are composed of linear buildings surrounded by green space and defined by the outer roads, whereas the buildings themselves serve as the block's defining perimeter in Vienna. However, the spaces in Zagreb were built as part of an initiative to develop the countryside and provide housing for foreign workers and low-income families, whereas the situation in Vienna was much different. This was due mostly to the fact that the gemeindebauten were built into the preexisting fabric of the city so the spaces were already defined by roads, rivers and other permanent structures and the architects were forced to give attention not only to the structures they were building but also to their surroundings.⁹ Additionally, there were many more people to house in a shorter period of time, so it was imperative that the space be used as efficiently as possible. Some people criticized Le Corbusier's design because they worried that the gaps between the buildings would become dead interstitial space. Otto Wagner sites the perimeter block as an excellent use of available space that should be used to create balance between built space and green space thus naturally solving the potential problem faced by Le Corbusier's design.¹⁰ Wagner's assertion brings to light that both designs incorporate a great deal of green space into the housing layout. Sitte suggests that when planning a city, steps be taken to enclose public spaces in order to

⁹ Wagner, Otto. "The Development of a Great City." First published in 1912, 485-500.

¹⁰ Wagner, Otto. "The Development of a Great City." First published in 1912, 485-500.

generate a feeling of intimacy and create deliberate views¹¹. The Rabenhof complex covers 50,000 square meters, but only thirty-eight percent of that land is built up- the other sixty-two percent is dedicated to enclosed, courtyard-like communal green space and public facilities. Thus while the sprawling lawns of the superblocks in Zagreb may look impressive, the Red Vienna gemeindebauten were not lacking in sufficient green space.

Gemeindebauten designers received vast amounts of criticism from architects around the world for being regressive in form, representing a missed opportunity to further the architecture of Vienna in a way that kept pace with countries like France and Germany, who were producing great modernist structures at a rapid pace. Not only did critics claim that gemeindebauten looked too much like “defensible fortresses” and “reflections of the petite bourgeois ideology,” they also reprimanded the designs for “lacking the comprehensive plan, technologically advanced building techniques and innovative spatial arrangements” that constituted housing build under the title “the New Architecture.”¹² Upon closer inspection of pertinent architectural ideas and texts of the period, it becomes apparent that this negative criticism is undeserved. Relevant designers Wagner and Sitte maintain that urban planning and architectural form should not be based on historical models but instead on modern needs; Wagner explains this phenomenon by describing the way in which people interact with art.¹³¹⁴ In many cases,

¹¹ Sitte, Camillo. *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*. New York: Random House, 1965.

¹² Blau, Eve. *The Architecture of Red Vienna, 1919-1934*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.

¹³ Sitte, Camillo. *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*. New York: Random House, 1965.

¹⁴ Wagner, Otto. "The Development of a Great City." First published in 1912, 485-500.

people do not understand art because the artistic language used and the art it describes are often not from the current time period, making it unrelatable- understanding comes once we begin expressing ourselves through new work and embracing natural progression.¹⁵ Similarly, while the forms of the gemeindebauten may not have been considered innovative design worthy of being called “New Architecture,” the people could relate to and feel proud of them, adding to the project’s success. Creating excellent urban spaces is more important than producing progressive architectural forms, especially when the concept of the project itself is as forward thinking as the Red Vienna gemeindebauten.

Large gemeindebauten of the same building type as the Raben Hof functioned not only as dwelling spaces but also helped form tight social networks. This building type makes architecture instrumental to the success of the community and communicates the purpose of the political project of Red Vienna while allowing for the development of social and political practices by shaping the urban space in which these things can take place and making them accessible to all. Blau states, “In accordance with the Social Democratic Party’s effort to [produce] social and cultural institutions concerned with health, housing, education and child care, both men and women were drawn into community networks which developed first in the gemeindebauten by incorporating worker housing with new cultural and social institutions that were part dwelling, part public space.”¹⁶ The gemeindebauten were true monuments by Alan London’s definition- they held extreme significance to the people because they

¹⁵ Wagner, Otto. "Style." First published in 1988, 73-80.

¹⁶ Blau, Eve. *The Architecture of Red Vienna, 1919-1934*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.

symbolized all that Vienna had overcome as a city and the work that the people had put into the movement, making it an enduring achievement. In this way, the size of these buildings is justified and their monumentality serves not only as a representation of success but of the sense of community and pride that developed as a result of building, living and cherishing the gemeindebauten.

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Wagner, Otto. "The Development of a Great City." First published in 1912, 485-500.

Wagner, Otto. "Style." First published in 1988, 73-80.



Figure 1. Rabenhof approach. Vienna.

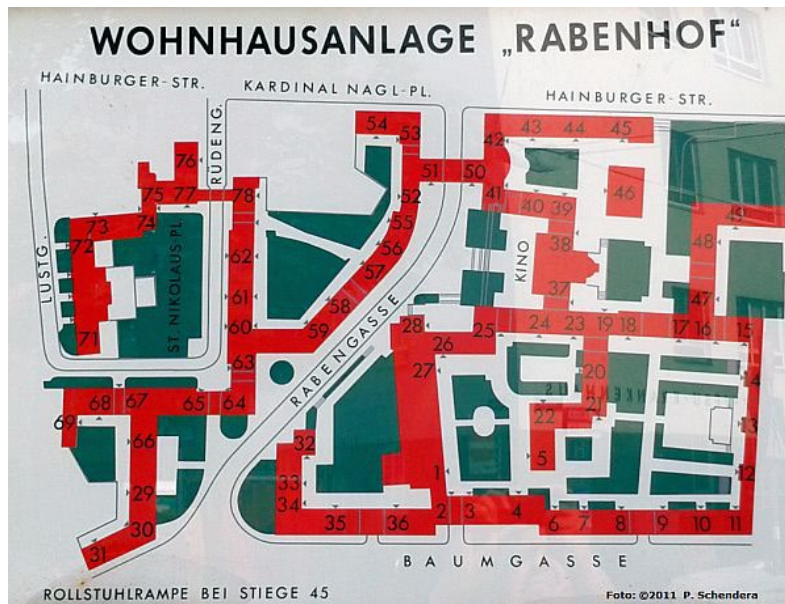


Figure 2. Rabenhof plan. Vienna.¹⁷

¹⁷ Schendera, PJ. "Unser Rabenhof, Ein Gemeindebau in 1030 Wien." Unser Rabenhof, Ein Gemeindebau in 1030 Wien. 2016. Accessed June 19, 2016. http://www.schendera.at/rbh/index_lageplan.php.



Figure 3. Banisters with flower-holders at the Rabenhof. Vienna.

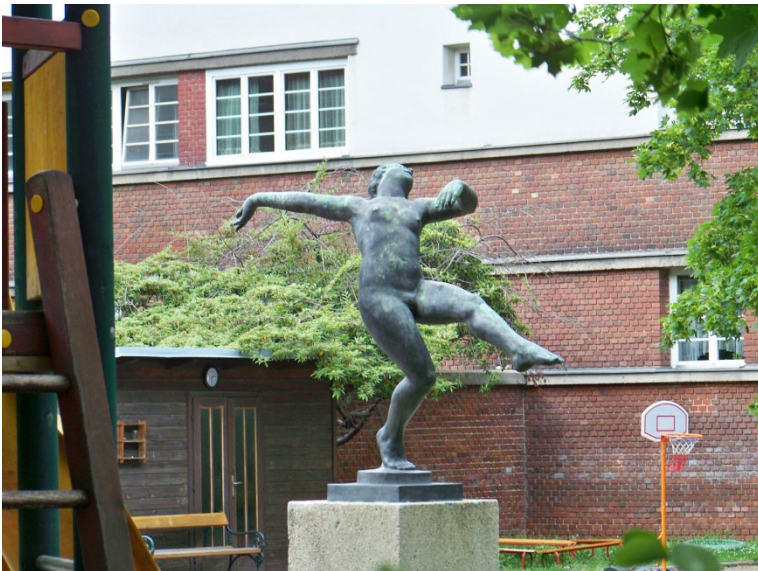


Figure 4. Sculpture in kindergarten playground, Rabenhof. Vienna.



Figure 5. Rabenhof Theater. Vienna.



Figure 6. Winarsky Hof. Vienna

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/10403914@N05/8679036705>



Figure 7. Karl Marx Hof. Vienna.

<https://www.wien.gv.at/spaziergang/ringlinien/karl-marx-hof.html>



Figure 8. Friedrich Engels Platz. Vienna

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wohnhausanlage_Friedrich-Engels-Platz_01_wiki.jpg



Figure 9. Frank's Leopoldine-Glocken Hof. Vienna.