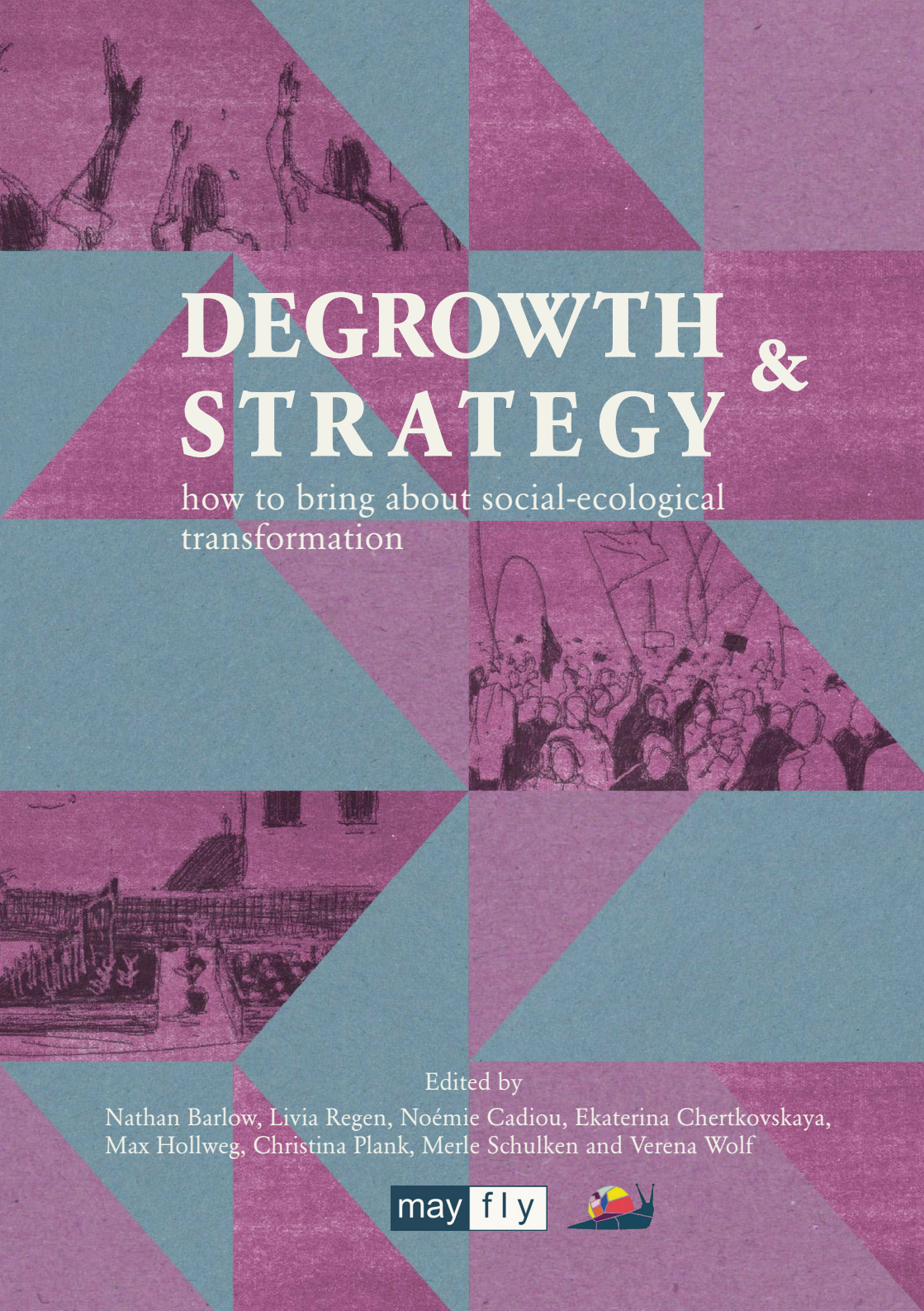


# DEGROWTH & STRATEGY

how to bring about social-ecological  
transformation



Edited by

Nathan Barlow, Livia Regen, Noémie Cadiou, Ekaterina Chertkovskaya,  
Max Hollweg, Christina Plank, Merle Schulken and Verena Wolf

may fly



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**may fly**

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## Chapter 12: Urban housing

### **An overview of strategies for social-ecological transformation in the field of urban housing**

**By Gabu Heindl**

*Homelessness exists not because the system is failing to work as it should,  
but because the system is working as it must.*  
Peter Marcuse (1988)

The dominant policy approach to housing worldwide has been an unquestioned pro-growth agenda within capitalist market logic: to stimulate more, faster and possibly cheaper housing construction. New housing – even if it is social housing – on greenfield sites (i.e., undeveloped land) is generally accompanied by soil sealing (where the soil is covered over with impermeable construction) for the creation of roads, parking lots, and so on.<sup>22</sup> An alarming number of newly built housing units are not at all constructed for addressing the housing crises, but to serve as abstract financial products (Aigner 2020). This phenomenon is a part of the broader process of the financialisation of housing, where housing is increasingly becoming a speculative commodity. Individual owner-occupiers purchase a home not only for “long-term secure housing but also as a quasi-asset (...) home-cum-commodity” (Nelson 2018). In addition to speculation on urban real estate, today’s platform capitalism is contributing to the dissection of housing into many potential capital assets, techno-commodifying the home and urban space through schemes like AirBnB, private car hiring platforms such as Uber, home delivery, and dating apps (Terranova 2021).

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22 United Nations Special Rapporteur Raquel Rolnik defines the Right to Adequate Housing as a combination of rights to spatial, environmental and infrastructural security (Rolnik 2014).

The increased attention to ecological issues within housing has opened up yet another terrain for capital. Ecological retrofitting leads to increases in rental costs, with “ecological gentrification” (Dooling 2008) causing evictions in the name of ecology. Ecological claims often reveal an imbalance between, on the one hand, those who can and want to afford ecological measures and, on the other, those for whom high environmental standards are not affordable or may even come to pose existential threats.

Most technical solutions to the environmental dimension of housing, such as the decarbonisation of the housing sector – itself an important goal – still operates within the confines of pro-growth hegemonic ideology. Critical literature links decarbonisation measures on the one side to “rebound effects” driven by the affluent (Sunikka-Blank *et al.* 2016) and on the other side to “fuel poverty”, “energy poverty”, and housing poverty (Boardman 2010). Together, this creates an “eco-social paradox” (Holm 2011). As long as housing remains a commodity and speculative asset regardless of social justice considerations, “greening” housing alone will not lead to housing and climate justice. In order to overcome the eco-social paradox, the degrowth movement must study and draw its conclusions from the history of housing struggles, socialist housing developments, rent strikes, class struggle and intersectionality.

“System change, not climate change” – so goes one of the more evocative slogans of the climate justice movement. Likewise, the issue of housing requires the dismantling of various existing paradigms. Yet, with every crisis, we are presented with new TINA (“There Is No Alternative”) arguments for why paradigm change is impossible.

A key political approach for degrowth housing is that of radical democracy – the idea that we need to fight for even more democracy and democratic rights. This is exactly *because* neoliberalism and authoritarianism impose the idea that, mostly relying on economic logic, democracy is not possible (Mouffe 2013). In contrast to a market-based approach towards housing, the radical democratic

approach aspires to housing justice. Housing justice emphasises intergenerational considerations, acknowledging that the rights of future generations are dependent on how our generation uses limited resources. Hence, the complex question is: how can social justice in housing be achieved while reducing the ecological impacts of housing?

A radical democracy framework is open to both strategies from within democratic institutions, as well as from the margins or the outside – and most of all for (often unexpected) alliances in between. In my book on radical democracy in architecture and urbanism (Heindl 2020), I laid out how the diversity of actors in housing struggles may act on three different levels: (institutional) politics, planning, and popular agency – and, whenever possible, through interactions between these different levels.<sup>23</sup> In other words, politics may be called “top-down” and popular agency “bottom-up”, with planning operating in between.

The aim of this chapter, which is structured along these three levels, is to provide an overview of tangible strategies for the social-ecological transformation of urban housing. In the hope of turning what is sometimes diagnosed as a “strategic indeterminance” of the degrowth movement (Herbert *et al.* 2018) into a progressive and transformative bundle of strategies, we will look at specific strategies – those that were experimented with in the past, those being enacted today, and those that do not yet exist. The early 20<sup>th</sup>-century housing policy of Red Vienna and the present-day Vienna Housing Model will serve as the main guiding examples.

## **Politics**

### Housing and communication policies of historic Red Vienna

In order to address the current housing crises, we can look at and (critically) draw from historical social(ist) housing policies, such as

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23 These different levels relate to, but are slightly different from the strategic logics outlined by Erik Olin Wright (ruptural, interstitial, and symbiotic; see Chapter 2).

Red Vienna's progressive social democratic housing politics of the interwar years (1919–1934), which was based on Austro-Marxist theory. During this period, Vienna's municipal housing programme pursued multiple objectives: supporting workers through decent and sanitary living, combined with public education infrastructure that supported political consciousness-raising in the working class, as well as the development of a sense of community.

Possibly the most essential housing policies were (and still are) tenant protections. Red Vienna inherited tenant protection as a reaction to the housing crises during World War I and it became a crucial precondition for the Red Vienna housing programme. It encompassed a set of tenant rights and a high level of rent control, such as setting caps on rent at quite a low level, security of the duration of rent and the possibility to hand over the flat within a family. These policies were complemented by a housing requisition law (the *Wohnungsanforderungsgesetz*), which allowed the municipality to claim and take over unused private housing for those in need. As a result of both, private investors did not see a profit in housing real estate and lost interest in speculative housing construction. Consequently, land prices fell. Rather than creating incentives for the private market, as would usually be done today, the social democratic administration of Red Vienna bought land and constructed communal housing themselves – not privileging capital's needs, but rather workers' needs for housing.

Vienna received tax sovereignty by becoming an independent state in 1922, which helped in the financing of Red Vienna's large-scale housing programme. This made it possible for politicians to establish luxury taxes, such as the progressive housing construction tax (*Wohnbausteuer*). The tax applied to all properties within the municipal jurisdiction but assessed large and luxurious villas and private property to be in an exponentially higher bracket than small working-class housing-units.<sup>24</sup> The tax helped to fund

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<sup>24</sup> In a way the housing construction tax was indirectly fighting growth by taxing affluent housing exponentially.

the construction of 64,000 communal housing units as well as kindergartens and libraries.<sup>25</sup> On a more economic level, the construction of these housing blocks increased employment rates and supported local industries such as the Wienerberger brick production. Throughout its existence, Red Vienna's housing politics and policies were fought by the political opposition and finally violently ended by the right-wing authoritarian "Austro-fascist" federal government in 1933.

### Taxing policies today

An example of a communication strategy around housing, as well as an example of a tax related to urban development gains, are the policies undertaken by the city of Basel. Since the 1970s, the Swiss city has implemented a land value capture tax (*Mehrwertabschöpfung*), a city-wide municipal levy that redistributes up to 70% of the profits (which would be derived from up-zoning or new-zoning from e.g., green space to housing zone) from real estate development into investment in public space and infrastructure. When communicating the benefits of this form of redistribution, city officials worked on the refinement of their communication strategy. Through this scheme, a transparent calculation of the expected profits of the property owner or developer is combined with an affect-loaded discourse on redistribution, rather than employing merely technical language. Instead of framing the policy as a public tax of 70% on private profits, the city is emphasizing in its communication the fact that the remaining 30% was, in fact, still a gift from the public to landowners. After all, the profit would be created without any work or achievement by the private landowner, but only due to the upzoning made possible by the municipality. A public act, which increases the development potential for the private piece of land. Such affective

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25 Red Vienna's housing programme formed the basis for present-day Viennese communal housing stock of 220,000 units, making Vienna's Municipal Department 50 one of the largest public housing authorities, and hence also in a position of responsibility to reduce the housing sector's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. For the relationship between Red Vienna and radical democracy, see Heindl 2020.



information strategies could be transferred to other tax policies, e.g., to introduce new taxes or to raise a CO<sub>2</sub> consumption tax, property tax, inheritance tax, vacancy tax or energy tax.

Another powerful communication strategy that can facilitate redistributive taxation is cost transparency. One example is to announce the actual costs of empty housing units for the public or to consider future recycling costs of building material into the calculation of construction costs. Also, municipalities could communicate the injustice of the gap between low property taxes and high-income tax.<sup>26</sup> This can be revealing, as it highlights an injustice that needs to be made more controversial, as speculation using housing is taxed much less than work, e.g., care work that is most relevant to society.

### Use and re-distribution of existing space

To use what already exists would possibly be the most effective degrowth strategy with regard to housing, and it certainly is quite the opposite of the historically dominant growth-dependent response to housing problems. In order to redistribute what already exists, municipalities would need to end the misuse of the housing stock such as buy-to-let models (housing units which are only purchased as an investment property and managed by large companies), secondary residences, commercial AirBnB developments, or empty homes. On this front, there is a paradigm shift already happening at different scales and places. For example, Tyrol, Austria has put in place a municipal ordinance restricting secondary residences. Barcelona has temporarily expropriated flats that banks repossessed and hoarded following the 2008-2014 Spanish financial crises and has restricted short-term private room-rentals such as AirBnB. Vancouver, with its conspicuously under-used downtown core of empty houses, has implemented an Empty Homes Tax in 2017, even if it is still fairly low at three per cent of a home's assessed value.

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26 This was lucidly documented in the exhibition "Boden für alle" at Architekturzentrum Wien (AzW), 2020/2021.

## Decommodification of land within a municipal territory

An important set of policies relates to the politics of urban land use. Today's high demand for housing and insufficient rent control makes real estate investments appealing terrains for those with excess capital. Subsequently, urban land prices have skyrocketed and affordable land for subsidised housing has become rare. In Austria, this resulted in a decrease in social or communal housing run by limited-profit associations<sup>27</sup> while, at the same time, private market housing construction boomed. In 2018, in order to secure affordable land for subsidised housing, Vienna's city government introduced a remarkable building code amendment, creating the zoning category "subsidised housing". This effectively caps land prices, since the provisions under the amendment limit land prices for subsidised housing to 188 €/m<sup>2</sup> gross floor area. Through such zoning, the municipality aims to make two-thirds of development subsidised housing. The impact of this law became most evident when landowners called it "quasi-expropriation" of their future speculated profit. This amendment, which should be seen as only a first step, resulted from counter-hegemonic claims and actions by a differentiated group of actors. On the one hand, housing cooperatives criticised the lack of land and, on the other hand, activists criticised the lack of policies limiting free-market speculation. Additionally, workshops and public debates on urban land as a commons enabled land price caps to become a conceivable idea and thus a practical possibility.

However, this law comes quite late, as a lot of land in Vienna has already been zoned. In addition, its implementation still has to be put into effect. A law that is not executed only "tames" capitalism (see Chapter 2). Even though the law puts private property rights into question, it does not address the initial problem of turning green land into construction sites, which contradicts agricultural

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27 In Austria subsidised housing is subjected to regulations regarding the land price, the rental price, and also limited-profit cooperations have to reinvest gains in funded housing projects.

and ecological demands (e.g., good agricultural soil for farming in Donaufeld, on Vienna's outskirts).

Generally, if new zoning for housing (or rather for “social housing” as it should be) is still to be pursued, it should at least be *limited-time* zoning and municipalities should be given the right as a priority buyer. This would make sure that land is not being hoarded and speculated on. In cases where it is not developed, the land can be – and should be – taken over by the municipality.

## **Planning**

The main objective of degrowth and social justice strategies should be to rather abandon new construction, and instead redistribute and refurbish existing structures and possibly densify built urban areas. Density is a planning goal, which would support and impact ecological mobility strategies and resourceful use of infrastructure. Yet, it has to come along with the planning of high-quality public and green space. Concurrently, there is a boom of new housing construction in nearly every city seeing economic growth. Within this growth-driven housing sector, at least some subsidies are dedicated to decarbonisation, relating mostly to technological aspects like low-energy or passive house construction or green facades. Yet, we know that the most ecological house is the one that is not built.

## Refurbishment

Refurbishment of existing housing stock may lead to some unexpected impacts. Many municipalities and governments are moving to end the subsidisation of fossil fuel-based heating in the home, which is already a positive step. However, there is a risk that this green turn in the housing industry fosters “low-carbon gentrification” (Bouzarovski *et al.* 2018). If there are no remediating policies in place, it could lead to unaffordable rent increases and, ultimately, evictions. Retrofitting must be more tightly linked to urban justice, rent safety, and rent control.

The “prebound effect”, demonstrates that if energy-efficient

retrofitting or affordable energy is made available to households with limited financial means, there may in fact be a less significant decrease in energy use than expected. Studies showed how households living in homes that are rated as inefficient may use much less energy than predicted (e.g., Sunikka-Blank *et al.* 2016). In terms of costs and effects, this suggests that there may be a gap between the performance of energy-saving devices and actual energy consumption, meaning that technical improvements may have a limited impact. In order to prevent the “*rebound effect*” – where efficiency improvements lead to more consumption, e.g., construction boom of detached houses “sanctioned” by passive house certification – measures must be connected to resolutions of general resourcefulness which include the calculation of grey energy and building site preparation.

In order to reduce new construction, the existing housing stock needs to be re-assessed, since the building industry continues to claim that refurbishing costs are much higher than new construction. These economic calculations can be challenged through new and all-inclusive means of calculating construction costs. Also, the protection of the existing housing stock must be customised to the appropriate context: While energy-inefficient and oil-consuming buildings (e.g., from the post-WWII-period) depend on conversion and modification, historic buildings may require proper legal protection rather than layers of insulation. If anything is to be taken down, circular economy and urban mining should be encouraged, since whatever is taken down should become upcycled for new construction. Yet, many of the current building techniques are not made for this. Hence, it would be favourable to add mandatory disassembly planning to the filing process of any new construction.

In addition, stricter laws would be needed to protect green spaces and trees as well as to prevent urban sprawl and soil sealing. And, to return to communication strategies, when it comes to negotiating it is not enough to merely call for an “end to soil sealing”: degrowth means de-sealing. Some cities have already taken up some of this

challenge, for example, Dresden's city council has established a "soil compensation account" (*Bodenausgleichskonto*), which involves requiring de-sealing of a certain area (soil recovery) in compensation for sealing elsewhere (European Commission 2021).

### Post-growth development

From a planning perspective, the ecological crisis raises the question of how to conceptualise *doing* nothing – which is not at all the same as not doing anything. All actors that shape the city – planners, citizens, administration, politicians – face the challenge of finding ways of defining "progress" without the need for new construction. The good news is that the younger generation of planners and architects are not keen on serving as tools for growth and capitalist agendas. Recently, established architecture office Lacaton Vassal received the Pritzker Prize, the highest architectural award, for their approach of carefully doing as little (re)construction as their projects need and for their exclusive focus on refurbishing. These are signs of a change in the general discourse in architecture.

### Unexpected alliances

Housing is more than housing and also relates to the quality of public space. To highlight this, I want to present the case of the rescue of Vienna's Danube Canal meadow. It is an interesting example of a bottom-up movement successfully interrupting the logic of growth in alliance with a top-down planning process – in which I played an active part as one of the planners who designed urban guidelines for the canal in 2014, commissioned by the city of Vienna.<sup>28</sup> While the guidelines were initially intended to regulate the aesthetics of new construction, we changed their logic to quite the opposite: a guide for the definition of areas where nothing should

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28 Donaukanal Partitur, in collaboration with my colleague Susan Kraupp, 2014. The process consisted of around fifty meetings with planning and maintenance authorities, users and politicians.

be constructed. By means of a “non-building plan”, we mapped and drew – through reversing the logic of a building or zoning plan – a clear prohibition against building within this important public waterfront of Vienna. Our non-building plan described explicitly that the few remaining non-commercialised areas along the water should not be commercially developed by private investors. This included the Donaukanalwiese, the last open-access horizontal piece of river channel bank in central Vienna. Yet, it was only after a group of activists named *Donaukanale für alle!* (“Danube Canal For All!”) organised sit-ins and protests that plans for large-scale gastronomic development on this remaining area were rejected. It is interesting, especially when considered in relation to the strategic perspective of the chapter as a whole, that government-commissioned guidelines only gained momentum when the activists used them to support their demands (Heindl 2020).

## **Popular agency**

### Commoning and decapitalising

The Syndicate of Tenements (*Mietshäusersyndikat*) in Germany and its younger sister organisation in Austria, HabiTAT, work toward self-organised affordable living (and working) by creating a network of non-profit and self-managed houses, mostly by refurbishing houses. Specifically, member associations buy land and buildings from the speculative market and transform them into commons. Their collective structure guarantees the permanent commitment of its sub-associations to not profiting from the living and working space. Such decapitalizing “nowtopias” represent a goal and strategy at the same time. However, commoning needs resources and opportunities to counter exclusiveness and inaccessibility, which such projects could easily succumb to.

Some municipal governments support cooperative building initiatives (*Baugruppen*) with subsidised land, for which the initiatives are (rightly so) required to give some social benefits

back to society. More often, however, such commoning projects operate without top-down support. Nevertheless, these projects are pioneers in certain social and ecological aspects, as they are experimenting with collective use of kitchens, living rooms, amenities, and so on. They are often engaged in practices such as sharing economy, solidarity economy as well as energy autonomy. In Vienna, supporting platforms such as the Initiative for Community Building and Living (*Initiative für gemeinschaftliches Bauen und Wohnen*) are important actors as they actively work on connecting bottom-up actors with the city administration in charge of official land-use policies. Additionally, they offer a platform for pressuring municipalities to continue to reserve land for collective housing.

Commoning is a precarious process that requires a lot of effort and energy – this is where all too often the participating groups consist of actors who have sufficient time resources. Hence, it is important to support the housing movement in its commoning projects and strengthen them by inserting radical democratic values and ways of organising to improve the accessibility and openness of their commoning projects. In addition, it would of course be very valuable if ways could be found for how such commoning processes could contribute their methods, knowledge, and experience to political and planning processes. In this way, lessons from small group experiments could be scaled up to the larger and more anonymous scale of social or public housing. This includes lessons for intersectional justice in housing, for example, certain small-scale experiments have developed methods for those who might not have the capacity to participate fully in collective processes to still benefit from self-governed housing models – these could be adapted to facilitate community-controlled social housing as well. Strategic alliances between degrowth actors with new housing cooperatives (for example *WoGen – Wohnprojekte Genossenschaft*, a cooperative for building initiatives in Vienna), and non-profit community land trusts – solidarity-based corporations which hold land and steer land use without profit-orientation (e.g., *Deutsche Stiftung Trias*) are vital to building bridges between individual,

small-scale efforts for alternative housing and society as a whole.

### Learning from past failures and successful alliances

A successful degrowth movement will, however, also rely on research and on lessons from the failures and successes of past projects. Degrowth-oriented projects are often dependent on a substantial mass of supporters and expertise and must endure for a long time to develop fully. Not all projects have the necessary perseverance. Yet, there are precedents which demonstrate how urban neighbourhoods would have developed in a very different way had there not been activist momentum by civil society: from the historic success of the protection of the Viennese Spittelberg area (including the squatted Amerlinghaus, which today remains a largely a non-profit community space), to the protest *Doncaucanale für alle!* (see above). Fridays for Future activists, mobility experts, researchers and oppositional politicians have been collectively protesting against the Lobautunnel, the construction of a highway tunnel under a natural resort in Vienna, as well as against further highway construction in Northern Vienna. This interdisciplinary and intergenerational alliance of protesters is demanding, amongst other things, a substantial upgrading of public mobility infrastructure in this area.

### Protesting and squatting

Last but not least I will discuss how civil disobedience in the form of protests and squatting can help steer society toward degrowth in housing. One way of moving forward is to prevent the growth of non-social housing – for example when protest movements block neoliberal developments which would not include a single social housing unit. Beyond this, movements are also working to undo the neoliberal sell-off of social housing, which Deutsche Wohnen & Co enteignen in Berlin has demonstrated powerfully (see case, this chapter). Finally, tenant protest movements in Barcelona are an example of the power of protests, which eventually resulted in the victory of a municipalist, radical-democratic party of former activist



and current mayor Ada Colau. Colau introduced redistributive policies such as the temporary expropriation of vacant flats owned by banks. We must not forget that Barcelona also has a large squatting scene, which has had a large role in the housing movement.

Squatting poses the property question in its most direct way and positions it at the centre of a radical paradigm and system change. By doing so, it smashes the system's logic as much as it acts as a useful survey of empty houses. Squatters scout for vacancies that could be used by those who urgently need housing. Squatting can also help save houses from demolition – not only because it exposes these buildings to the public's attention, but also through what has been called “convivial conservation” (Büscher *et al.* 2020), meaning: houses need people for their maintenance. How squatting becomes a useful part of the system can be seen in how certain squatted houses have developed into cultural centres in the urban fabric (in Vienna e.g., the music venue Arena). Squatted houses often have not only been witnesses to civil engagement but – when successfully turned into self-organised, non-profit housing – have also become eco-retrofitted and experimental zones for co-living and solidarity economy.

## **Conclusion**

Degrowth strategies are not about pursuing purity, but rather embody a “use what you can” ethic. In other words – and relating directly to radical democracy – it is about a counter-hegemonic strategy. Such a counter-hegemonic strategy is especially necessary when, compared to the present context in which TINA is the norm, the reformist measures of the past look like the most daring future utopias. When travelling the path to shift the paradigm from growth to degrowth, it is important not to play the ecological question against the social question (see also Chapter 7). It also means taking the smallest steps wherever we can: we can simultaneously develop the infrastructure and conditions needed for change, form alliances with a spirit of critical pragmatism, or advocate non-reformist

reforms. The latter are especially important as they can “set in motion a trajectory of change in which more radical reforms become practicable over time” (Fraser and Honneth 2003). Rosa Luxemburg offers a productive perspective on reforms: these can allow for important (next) steps and small victories – even within capitalism. But a comprehensive kind of change (for Luxemburg: the revolution) must not be left out of sight (Luxemburg 1982). Hence, a degrowth perspective on housing should connect projects, long-term visions and small steps through a comprehensive framework of radical democracy and housing beyond capitalism.

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Degrowth is a research area and a social movement that has the ambitious aim of transforming society towards social and ecological justice. But how do we get there? That is the question this book addresses. Adhering to the multiplicity of degrowth whilst also arguing that strategic prioritisation and coordination are key, *Degrowth & Strategy* advances the debate on strategy for social-ecological transformation. It explores what strategising means, identifies key directions for the degrowth movement, and scrutinises strategies that aim to realise a degrowth society. Bringing together voices from degrowth and related movements, this book creates a polyphony for change that goes beyond the sum of its parts.

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