

# CRITICAL CARE ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM FOR A **BROKEN** PLANET

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# Towards a Radical Democratic Politics of Urban Land: The Case of (Red) Vienna

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“You don’t have to live in these apartments to love Vienna, owning them will do”: In Vienna today you can read two types of messages concerning housing and, ultimately, land, which are publicly inscribed on facades. The “owning without living in it” message is of the first type: written over the photograph of a female model on a huge poster covering an inner city construction site in 2011, it is, as a variation on a common theme, typical, and is also a propaganda instrument of current neoliberal appropriations of urban space.

Owning apartments in fashionable city quarters is a part of the distribution processes from bottom to top, from public to private; uncoupling the owning of apartments from living in them, more narrowly, exemplifies the increasing financialization of urban space, which is being packaged and sold as an investment product.

Interest rates for excess capital are still high when it is invested in real estate. This goes for housing as well as for land, which can be reproduced to a much lesser extent than housing space. So, in times of growing urban populations, financialization goes along with extreme increases in rents and prices for housing as well as for land. And while we are witnessing the usage of public monies to subsidize private condominiums (with subsidies increasingly being directed to home ownership, subsidized housing is being sold, not rented), more and more public land is being privatized, also in Vienna.

More frequently than such explicit neoliberal messages of the kind mentioned, you find another type of inscription on Vienna’s facades. It is more everyday, but not really part of today’s socio-political and politico-economic reality. It reads “Built by the Municipality of Vienna in the years 19XX to 19XX from the proceeds of the housing construction tax.”<sup>1</sup> The designated years range from the mid-1920s to the early 1930s, when the Social

<sup>1</sup> “Erbaut von der Gemeinde Wien in den Jahren 19XX–19XX aus den Mitteln der Wohnbausteuer.”



You don't have to live in these apartments to love Vienna. Owning them will do, 2011.  
Photo: Renate Kordon

Democratic administration of “Red Vienna” built roughly 400 “Gemeindebauten,” communal housing estates often with large public green spaces and gardens, in every single district (except the inner city); a total of 64,000 apartments built until 1933 (when a proto-fascist dictatorship of the Catholic Right took over in Austria). The big red letters stand for the same fact on every *Gemeindebau*: after a radical tax reform, luxury taxes and a progressive housing construction tax earmarked for communal construction became vital in making the buildings carrying this very message part of urban reality. This was an element of the large-scale solutions to the persistent housing problem put forward by the Social Democrats. In this context, with the 1922 Rent Control Act,<sup>2</sup> private building activity decreased (because massively lowered rents made it less profitable), so land prices also dropped. This made it possible for the Municipality of Vienna to acquire low-priced land on a large scale. In this agenda, housing politics are clearly linked to land politics. And not only does the communal housing program contrast sharply with today’s neoliberal politics of offering incentives to private investors for building new housing space. Red Vienna’s housing politics also exemplify one aspect of the formation of *agonistic, dissensual* politics—and that is the transfer of an administrative financing measure (such as taxing and investing into housing) into the realm of politics by charging it with the affective

<sup>2</sup> For more details see Eve Blau, *The Architecture of Red Vienna, 1919-1934* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 138.

energy of a collective struggle over the future of a people;<sup>3</sup> a struggle in which victories are proudly and publicly proclaimed, e.g., in facade inscriptions in the way of “We took some good money away from those who monopolize all the wealth in order to build this housing block.”

Given today’s urban housing crises, entangled as they are with struggles over public land, I think we are at the moment of inheriting the message of struggle to be read in the still-shining inscriptions of Red Vienna (wrestling them from the sedimented state of merely technical information).<sup>4</sup> In this case, and with radical democracy as our vanishing point, the concept of inheriting has to be a critical one—along the lines of Derrida’s reaffirmation of a Marxian legacy through processes of critical “filtering.”<sup>5</sup> By this filtering, in inheriting a politics of struggle from Red Vienna, one will definitively want to get rid of a “politics of strong and unified identities” inherent to (not only) Viennese Socialism. By this I mean a combination of centralistic paternalism and veiled racism which lingers on today in the city administration’s restrictive rules of access to the 220,000 municipal apartments. Access regulations and rhetoric (today as they were in 1930) are about “protecting” (by privileging) those who have been “here” for a longer time from those who have come recently or are still about to come, i.e., immigrants (many of them paying ridiculously high rents for private housing).

Such politics of segregation has to be approached in a broader geopolitical context of struggles over land: Taking our cues from Silvia Federici’s post-colonial feminist perspective, we can see how central European metropolitan land and housing issues are closely connected to neo-colonial land grabbing and expropriation of commons in the Global South (often for the benefit of Western corporations), which is, of course, one of the major reasons for forced migration.<sup>6</sup>

Along with the filtering of the identitarianism feeding into paternalism and racism, another critical angle in inheriting from Red Vienna that I want to briefly mention here is: It was not radical enough. With regard to land and housing, a radical politics would have to start, as the *radex* has it, with and on the ground: to take the land out of the private market, stop the right to the monopoly of land and restore land as a commons, not owned by private proprietors. While the bottom-up, self-help “Settlers’ Movement” (“Siedlerbewegung”) had a clearly socialist conception of collective land ownership, and Red Vienna’s early concepts for land politics<sup>7</sup> also considered the expropriation of all land, Red

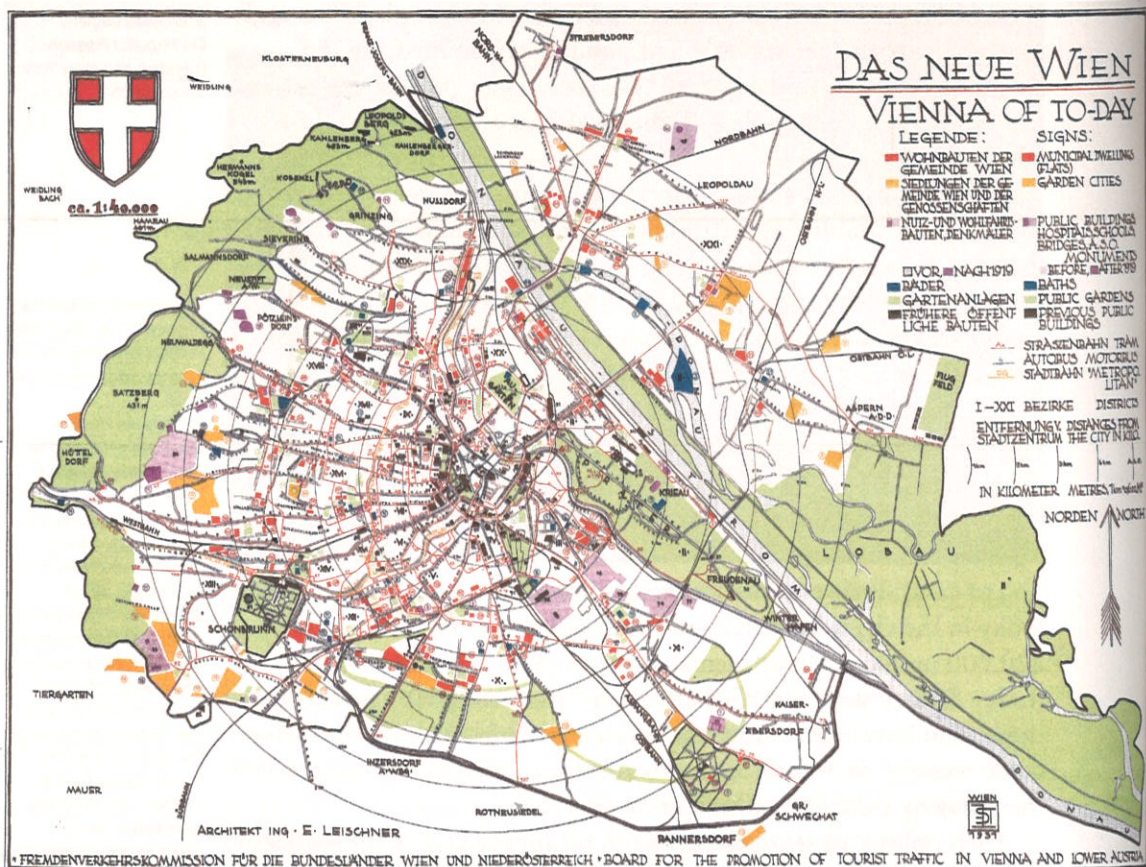
3 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London and New York: Verso, 2005).

4 I develop this point in my book *The Other PPP: Politics Planning Popular Agency*, forthcoming in 2019.

5 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

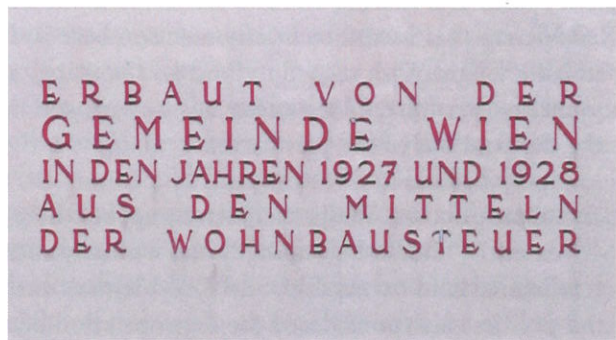
6 Federici highlights how primitive accumulation, as a primal expropriation and precondition to financialization, spells war against women—to the degree of witch-hunts—because it is women who embody care and a non-commercial commoning of the land. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004).

7 An important reference for both was Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City, as condensed by Blau: “Howard’s original cooperative conception of the garden city: common ownership of land, exclusion of private property, production based on co-operative rather than competitive, capitalist principles.” There Blau also writes about the expropriation concept of early Red Vienna’s advisor on housing matters, Gustav Scheu. Blau, *The Architecture of Red Vienna, 1919-1934*, 90-4.



Erich Leischner: Das Neue Wien/Vienna of Today, 1931. Map showing Red Vienna's new municipal buildings and facilities.

Red Vienna inscription, Rabenhof Municipal Housing Estate.  
Photo: Gabu Heindl



Vienna's municipal administration never installed effective expropriation laws. It therefore remained dependent on market conditions (much as it manipulated them to some degree in their favor); all communal land was purchased on the open market.<sup>8</sup>

And today? Even a brief look at public land resources in contemporary Vienna<sup>9</sup> shows that a "public land map" of the city would be difficult to draw. First, there is no transparency when it comes to municipal land ownership (ironically, based on the argument that keeping ownership secret helps prevent private speculation). Secondly, large pieces of land are now owned by public entities with sub-companies that act commercially in dealing with land according to private market rules (e.g., the Austrian Federal Railways [ÖBB]); they would even refuse to call the land that they own "public." Consequently, large portions of this land are being sold to private buyers for high-priced housing developments.

Altogether, with land prices sky-rocketing on the free market, the Municipality is facing a lack of affordable land for subsidized housing. However, it has to be said that first steps toward a "repairing" of Vienna's current land politics have already been made: In 2018, the city administration introduced a change to the building code, adding a new land use category named "subsidized housing" in order to curb property speculation and effectively restrict land prices.<sup>10</sup>

To conclude: Land is a pre-condition, a veritable *fundamental* to affordable housing, or rather, to any architecture.<sup>11</sup> When I speak in this context of fundamentals and of politics of *grounding*, this does not mean that we are dealing with fixed grounds or pre-given fundamentals. Ground is not soil. It is a category in the kind of radical-democratic, post-fundamentalist politics of architecture and planning that I am generally advocating. In this theoretical framework, society's fundamentals are always shaky and contingent—exactly *because* they matter—and foundations, ground(ings), are always in dispute. This is what politics is about, and it is the task of democratic politics to keep the grounds and channels of public dispute open (against neoliberal "TINA" anti-politics, as well as against the more recent nationalist authoritarianisms). This, not least, involves keeping grounds public.

It is with these historical, critical and conceptual points in mind that I want the following manifesto to be read: a tiny manifesto for a politics of CARE for housing as a public good and human right, thus as a CARE also for land (on its political grounds, shaky, partial, disputed).

<sup>8</sup> In 1931, Red Vienna's ownership of urban land equalled one-third of the city's total area (ibid., 141). The availability of land defined the location of the Gemeindebauten. For further critique on this dependency, see Helmut Weihsmann, *Das Rote Wien: Sozialdemokratische Architektur und Kommunalpolitik, 1919-1934* (Vienna: Promedia, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> With the Vienna Property Acquisition and Urban Development Fund (installed in 1984, when Vienna was a shrinking city), the Municipality of Vienna strategically buys and sells land to stimulate city development, especially through funding social housing. Yet today with financialization and rapid population growth, the high-priced land is not affordable for subsidized housing.

<sup>10</sup> This change of the building code does not apply to existing zoning, with only greenfield land changed to building land. Still, opponents to this new land use category call this restriction of speculative profit (always fictitious—but then, financialization is the empowering of capital's fictions) as "quasi-expropriation," given the possible 80% cut compared with free market land prices.

<sup>11</sup> Reinhold Martin criticizes the 12 fundamentals of Rem Koolhaas' Biennale in 2014 for forgetting the 13th, being real estate. Reinhold Martin, "Fundamental #13. Real Estate as Infrastructure as Architecture," *Places Journal* (May 2014), <https://doi.org/10.22269/140512>.

## MANIFESTO FOR A POLITICS OF CARE FOR HOUSING

- C** Cease selling public ground! Cease speculation!  
Claim public property as public!
- A** Acquire urban land as commons!  
Actively turn public housing into a democratic duty!
- R** Raise the quantity of communal and cooperative housing!  
Rent to everyone!
- E** Expropriate the expropriators! An old demand—which  
we should inherit as a regulative idea in democratic  
struggles over land.

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