

CONTRACTING SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL HOUSING? A DEVELOPMENT TOOL FOR NEW URBAN AREAS

Betül Bretschneider

Abstract

The contribution deals with a planning and coordinating method for the new urban development areas within the existing urban fabric of Vienna. Social housing is the main use of these new urban development areas. The emerging housing projects affect the whole urban transformation process in Vienna, the city of 'social housing' since almost 100 years.

This special planning method - 'the housing contractor competition' model - of the City of Vienna has been developed in 1995 to improve the quality of (subsidized) social housing with regard to architectural design, cost efficiency and ecological impact. It is a competition model for the development and planning of new housing buildings and areas: the architects, construction engineers and housing contractors develop together building concepts for an affordable and high-quality housing production. This housing development method requires guaranteed maximum construction and user costs based on the architectural planning of the competition project. By co-operating from an early stage onward, the stakeholders (planners, housing subsidy department and housing contractors) are involved in the planning process to optimize the project under technical, economical and ecological aspects. The competition aims at a better performance and stronger competition between the teams, involving the architect teams and the housing contractors in financial optimization of housing projects.

During the last years architects and contractors appeal for changes in the competition process showing controversial positions and planning traditions. All players of the process are recently seeking new solutions. Involving all players of the urban planning process creates new perspectives in planning practices, which can help to improve and optimize the current planning methods.

The main question of my contribution is: How could Vienna's planning tool for housing production be modified to guarantee the sustainable quality of urban transformation and urban development of the city dominated by historic urban fabric?

What are the controversial positions and conflicting targets of the urban development process? How has the built environment been affected in the last decades by the housing contractor competition? The study investigates the social and ecological character of current practice of urban development regarding building typologies and structures, common and public spaces,

traffic organization and ground-floor-zone. In this context comparable depth-in interviews, hearings, discussion series with the involved architects, planners, contractors, users and planning authorities, as well as newspapers and online publications of city of Vienna deliver new findings.

1. Which city? Eco city, knowledge city or finance centre?

Since the 1990s, in the period of deindustrialization and liberalization of economies, as city has become the major address of capital accumulation and economic growth, the local governments have been forced to install new redevelopment strategies to transform the cities to attractive places for consumption, tourism and headquarters of trans-national companies, which require a fundamental restructuring in urban policy. Various terms have been used to describe this process such as urban regeneration, revitalization, revival, redevelopment, reconstruction and improvement. The 'competition of cities' has changed the urban planning tradition in the European cities. Also in Vienna the city government has transformed the planning strategies by opening up to private developers to build high raise office buildings on the waterfronts, on former brown fields and even in the recreational green areas.

The first head quarter towers have begun to rise in unexpected new development areas. One of them is Danube City, on the huge concrete platform 'Donau Platte' by the riverside. This huge concrete slab has been originally planned and prepared as Expo-ground, but was not realized after putting Expo to a referendum in 1991 with a negative feedback of the population. A series of new urban development areas, all named as City (Wienerberg City, Siemens City, Bahnhof City, etc.) is already developed or going to be developed.

Parallel to this development, several international institutions (OECD, UNⁱ, Territorial Agenda for EUⁱⁱ, ECⁱⁱⁱ, CEC^{iv}, EEA) issued position papers and declared a cohesion policy towards a sustainable urban development and urban regeneration. Within a very short time the sustainable development has become the most important discourse based on economical growth. (Jenks, Burton, Williams, 2000).^v Various position papers giving the agenda of sustainability challenge the city governments and local authorities by the implementation of major targets such as strengthening cities, social and physical regeneration in urban areas, protecting and improving the urban environment to achieve the local and global sustainability targets.^{vi} One of the recent position papers of the European Commission defines the following economy based objectives as a collective target, besides the revitalization of historic centres: economic development in areas with social problems, exploitation of the technological assets of cities and environmental action linked to economic goals. While compensating the loss of production industries and replacing them with service and knowledge industries, the ecologicalisation of urban policy promoted also energy-efficiency activities in the building sector. However the conflicting interests of the real estate market constrain the rapid implementation of really sustainable development measures.

1.1 High demand on housing as impact of increased migration

Besides the major issue of competitiveness and attractiveness of the cities, social housing, migration and ageing population have been the key issues of the urban policy since 1990s also in Vienna.

Vienna's population has grown slowly but constantly due to the immigration from the neighbouring countries caused by the deindustrialization of the post-socialist territories i.e. in the cities in Germany, Poland and Slovakia and in the cities of Ex-Yugoslavia as well as due to the ongoing immigration from the rural areas and small towns to Vienna within the country. In the last 10 years, the population of the city has grown around 200.000, to 1.8 Mio.^{vii} However there are some estimations referring i.e. to the water consumption data of the city population as indicator, that the population has grown already over 2 Mio, due to the unregistered migrants from the neighbouring countries.

1.2 The increasing demand for affordable housing and urban policy

As increased immigration has caused a high demand on (affordable) housing, Vienna's city government began to pay more attention to the subsidized housing and began to reorganize the housing production, to regulate the housing market and to keep increasing rents and property prices under control.

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Figure 1. Population growth 1997-2007, City of Vienna,
Municipal Department 23 - Economic Affairs, Labour and Statistics

1.3 Urban renewal versus urban development?

The city government in Vienna has the two main activity fields of urban planning and policy:

- urban renewal authorities managing and promoting the renewal of existing housing stock and regeneration of urban fabric,

- urban development managing and promoting the production of new housing and steering urban (re)development.

The urban renewal program has been established for the renovation and modernization of Vienna's historic housing stock built between the end of 19th century and at the beginning of 20th century, in the period of mass immigration and mass industrialization. 2001 about 1/5 of the building stock and 34% of the total housing units in Vienna have been built before 1919, the First World War (Fassmann, 2009).^{viii} These historic buildings are giving the character of the central city areas. Towards the end of the 19th century the older smaller sized building blocks were demolished in only 20 years to make place for the regular block raster system. So the structure of the city was changed fundamentally. The intensive urban renewal program of City of Vienna started in 1984 with the foundation of urban renewal authorities (wohnfonds_wien). After the big city expansion projects of the 1970's (e.g. Schöpfwerk, Alterlaa) and 1980's (e.g. Brünnerstraße), the city of Vienna attached importance to urban renovation and to improvement of urban fabric in the central city areas. Until today a big amount of the housing units in the historical buildings has been modernized by providing bathroom, modern technical equipment and central heating system. Since the mid 1980's the historic building stock has been renovated successfully. Only a small rate of them is still not modernized. Today only a very limited amount of low cost housing units, which are affordable for new citizens, young people and elderly people and for lower income groups, are left in the historic buildings (in low standard). (Bretschneider, 2008)^{ix}

The problems such as 'segregation' and 'decline' have been challenging the city government more or less. The ongoing 'gentrification' is going to be also a problem of the well fare city Vienna. During increasing immigration from the de-industrialized cities of neighbouring countries, the City of Vienna has been concentrated on the following goals: to stabilize the economy by attracting transnational companies and by promoting the local real-estate market and the construction industry as well as by producing new housing stock for the increasing demand.



Figure 2. Transformation of the Central Railway Station into a new district Bahnhof City (Sonnenwendtviertel) S: www.hauptbahnhof-wien.at (Access. 2012)

Vienna's **urban development program** sets strategies for the development of new social housing and mixed-use urban areas in the central city areas. Vienna's strategic urban development plan (STEP 2000 and 2005)^x embraces 13 target areas as future development areas. (Fig. 3)

The new development areas are in most cases brown fields of local production companies or the vacant or only partly used rail transport areas (i.e. Bahnhof City, Nordbahnhof, See Stadt Aspern).

The inward development of the city brought more density, new uses and high rise building complexes structured in new urban typologies, which are significantly different than the existing homogeneous block raster structures. (Figure 3)



Figure 3. Vienna's current 13 urban redevelopment target areas
Source: STEP 2005, City of Vienna

Vienna's historic urban fabric consisting of perimeter block structures with internal courtyards and street spaces between the blocks is traditionally the place of functional and cultural diversity, mix in small-scale. The social and functional mix of new development areas is not small scaled like the traditional urban fabric. The high-rise and more density building complexes have been built in urban typologies, which are different than existing homogenous urban structure. The new urban development areas remain as peripheral areas to the central city without showing the traditional 'urban' character of the rest of the city.

2. The tenure of households in social housing

Both the urban renewal program and urban development program are based on the 'social' housing. Social housing as term here means 'housing run by not-for-profit

or public landlords for rent, normally at below-market rents' (Hills, 2007).^{xi} Social housing consists of two main forms of housing tenure in Vienna:

- council housing let by the city of Vienna and
- housing let by the non-profit or limited-profit housing associations using housing subsidies following the housing act (Wiener Wohnbauförderungs- und Wohnhaussanierungsgesetz – WWFSG 1989)

The city of Vienna is the biggest Landlord in Europe owning 220.000 council housing units, all built after the First World War up to the 1970`s. Highly standardized construction and building components produced for the council housing (Blau, E., 1998)^{xii} have been the beginning of 'housing as mass-product' with strong working class identity. In Vienna there are 77 % tenants and only 13% owners.^{xiii}

Since the 1970's, the city government stopped to build council housing. After the intensive urban regeneration program of the 1980's to modernize the existing housing stock built before the First World War, in the 1990's the housing initiative of the city government had the target of 10.000 new subsidized housing units per year.

2.1 New housing development toolkit: Housing contractor competition

The city government has been regulating and supporting the development of housing in Vienna more than 80 years long. As mentioned before, the main component of the emerging development areas also in Vienna is housing. The new housing projects are mainly developed and built by 'Austrian Limited-Profit Housing Associations' (Gemeinnützige Wohnbaugesellschaften) dealing with the development of subsidized housing.

In 1995 the housing fund of the city of Vienna (wohnfonds_wien) implemented a development model - so-called 'housing contractor competition - for subsidized housing projects to achieve the following aims:

- to increase the spatial and architectural quality of the (subsidized) social housing,
- to reduce the construction costs and the (rental) housing costs for the tenants,
- as well as to improve ecological efficiency and architectural quality.

The housing property development competitions affect directly the urban development in Vienna. Since the implementation of housing contractor competitions in 1995, 44 competitions were carried out on 163 plots by using 752 million Euro housing subsidies for about 18.000 housing units (Vice-major of Vienna M. Ludwig, 2010).^{xiv}

The so called 'housing contractor competition' requires a collaborative teamwork of architects, construction engineers, landscape architects and the (limited-profit) housing associations for the development of large-scale multi-storey housing (between 200 and 300 Housing units).^{xv} The competition entries contain a

architectural concept for one or more housing blocks including construction costs, time schedule as well as landscape design.

In the recent years the housing competitions have been issued with various emphases such as passive (energy) housing standard, timber and timber containing construction technology, intercultural housing and government assisted housing for the low income groups.

2.2 High-tech standards versus affordability: Assessment Proceeding

An advisory commission consisting of architects, planning experts and housing authorities assesses the competition entries according to the following selection criteria to select the winner project:

- innovation in architectural concept including landscape design,
- social sustainability (mix of different income groups),
- ecology (energy saving standards and material choice),
- economy (construction costs and logistic costs),
- financial conditions for tenants and property owners.

Producing more housing reduces the high demand in the housing real estate market and as a consequence decreases rents and property costs. Since 1970s the majority of the target tenant groups of subsidized housing projects have been middle-income groups.

The new legislations leading to higher security measures (i.e. fire protection, earthquake resistance) and to higher energy efficiency increased the rents and property prices significantly. However the current building regulations require low-energy standards in Austria. Even passive house standards for housing are no rarity anymore.

2.3 The aims and consequences of housing policy:

Generally a new urban development area is planned in two steps: the first step is the preparation of master plans by an architect's office. The second step is the housing contractor competition for the subsidized housing block/s on the current urban development area.

The master plans regulate the parcelling, building structures and building functions. The commercial concerns of 'housing associations' define the way and size of parcelling: They determine (in correlation with the cost limits for construction and building plots) the decision process as well as the physical and social structure of future urban development. The development area is divided into building lots in proper dimensions taking into account the capacities of housing associations. The feasibility of housing blocks (planned for at least 60 housing units) affects the dimensions of the building plots and so the urban character in the master plans. Moreover the building legislations as well as the parcelling system make overlapping small-scale and mixed-use building structures that would be similar to the existing urban fabric very difficult.

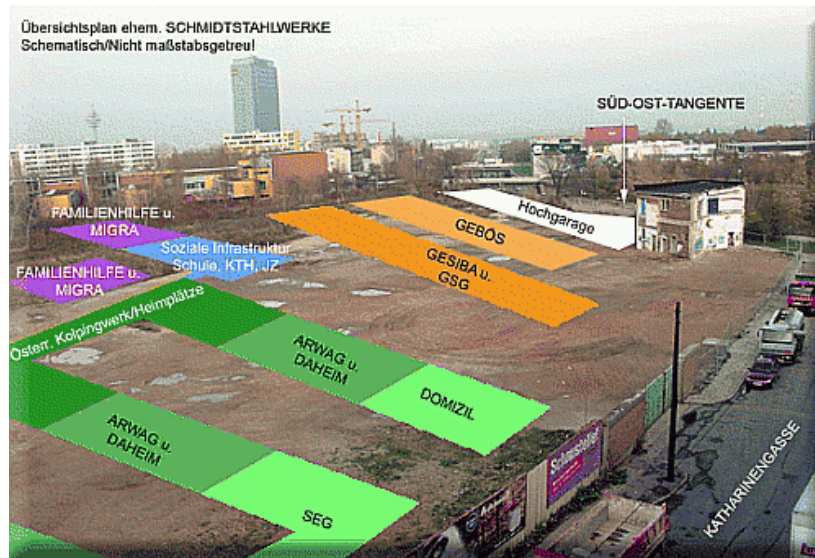


Figure 4. The parcelling of a housing contractor competition area,
Source: IS wohn.bau, 2007

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Figure 5. Masterplan of the most extensive urban development area Aspern
Seestadt on a former airfield, Source: www.schicker.at 2007

2.4 Architectural urban quality versus cost-effective building?

In the past years architects and housing associations having contradictory interests appealed for an optimization of the contractor competition model to guarantee more architectural urban qualities while reducing construction costs and rental costs. The architects, housing developers and planning authorities discussed several times the city making process during the last years. The social and ecological aspects of urban and building planning have gained more importance due to a recent revision of the existing collaborative competition. The subsidized housing sector shows recently the following challenges:

- decreasing amount of subsidies for social housing,
- growing competition between two programs due to the budget cuts

between urban development by producing new subsidized housing and urban renewal by renovation of existing housing stock,

- hardly any available building lots/vacant areas in the central city areas
- increasing final costs of housing for tenants and owners due to the increasing building lot costs and due to the higher technical requirements and strict energy saving standards (the construction costs and as a result rental or property costs are not allowed to exceed the maximal price level given by the housing subsidy authorities).

On the other side for the other stakeholders of the process such as architects and urban planners the problems to realize housing projects have following obstacles:

- over-regulation in planning and design; by the legislative restrictions and regulations (high-tech construction standards and enforcing safety and comfort regulations), by the housing act, by the ‘conservative’ housing real estate market,
- peripheric character of emerging neighbourhood culture without having vital open spaces and street life (partly accompanied by shortage of children play grounds and places for young people),^{xvi} Difficulties by improving an ‘attractive and interactive’ ground floor zone and adjacent open spaces between the blocks and within the blocks (the ground floors of the ‘new’ housing blocks generally belong to garages, garage accesses, storages and waste containers).
- ‘conservative’ housing real estate market and housing associations forcing a anti-innovative discourse by controlling the architectural design, size and typology of the housing units with classical spatial organization for families with children (although almost the half of Vienna’s population like in other European cities are living in single households)^{xvii}



Figure 6. A competition site for 650 Housing units on the brown field of former Mautner Markhof ground Source: City of Vienna, wohnfonds_wien, 2010

Recently the interdisciplinary jury of housing contractor competitions consisting of architects, engineers and housing authorities (wohnfond_wien) have focused on the functionality and vitality of ground floor zone and the quality of common

spaces, play grounds, local supply, social facilities, traffic calming measures as important criteria for the selection of the winner project.^{xviii}

Another problem is the decreasing quality of the architectural concept of the competition project during the realization process. Especially the quality and usability of open spaces and ground floors are not ensured, due to the obligatory cost savings measures of the contractors or disinterest for the urban quality.^{xix}

3. Conclusions: Are affordability and sustainability compatible?

Currently the housing associations and housing contractors finance their housing projects increasingly without using housing subsidies, because in that case the additional regulations and restrictions of the housing act are not valid and therefore the housing construction costs are lower. Furthermore the rental income (yield) is not limited as in the case of the subsidized housing. Although the housing associations are only allowed to be limited profit-oriented, they have to invest furthermore for a guaranteed circulation of capital. As mentioned before, the pressure on the real estate market and the shortage of buildable land in the central areas of the city with easy public transport accessibility are the further reasons for this trend.

Although the city government plans to build additional social housing units, and declares a paradigm shift by the contracting structures (e.g. property owner cooperations, participative housing developing) there are still no convenient measures that are already implemented. The commitments to optimization and promotion of social housing are not concrete. The governance of social housing and urban planning is rather complex, conservative and inflexible.

To ensure the quality of the open spaces and ground floors in new development areas,

- on the one hand a deregulation (less restriction for new users and other or unconventional uses)
- - on the other hand new legislative regulations are necessary to enable the 'urban' quality particularly focused on the ground floors and open spaces (restrictions by garage and storages in the street level or the guaranteed realisation of open space improvement measures).

At the end the following questions are still omnipresent: Are the current high buildings standards of building practice the only way to guarantee the ecological qualities and living comfort? How can the transformability of built environment for the future generations relating to demographic changes be ensured?

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