

Interview: Christian Muhr, February 11<sup>th</sup> 2016  
Photos: Johanna Rauch

Strongly rising urban populations, the euro crisis, the ECB's zero interest rate policy and the stagnation in social housing have led to strong demand for real estate and a consequently steep increase in purchase and rental prices for apartments, especially in large cities such as Vienna.

According to a recent report by the social organisation *neunerhaus* both the number of people at risk of poverty who are facing high accommodation costs and the average level of these costs has risen significantly in Austria. The situation has worsened further due to the high number of these new rental contracts which have fixed terms.

The independent aid organisation *neunerhaus* has been addressing the complex subject of housing and homelessness for 15 years with the twin aims of developing innovative concepts for the sustainable social inclusion of homeless people and implementing these concepts in its own apartments and apartment buildings. The three current buildings and around 80 further apartments in Vienna now offer about 500 homeless people each year the opportunity to lead a self-determined and dignified life within their own four walls.

The recently completed *neunerhaus* Hagenmüllergasse in Vienna's 3rd district was designed by *pool Architekten* and built by *WBV-GPA*. It opened in 2015. Each of the 73 small, individually shaped apartments has a kitchen and everything required for an independent decent quality of life. While the privacy and autonomy of the residents is expressly respected and encouraged the house also contains numerous communal spaces in and around the central staircase which is structured as a half-open, vertical meeting space that rises through six storeys of the building.

With its progressive philosophy and a radical architecture which is based on the needs of its residents the *neunerhaus* embodies the complete antithesis of the still widespread typology of the "home" which was originally derived from the clinic and the barracks.

CM: I have read that, over time, homeless people forget how to live in a home. As the architect and the CEO of *neunerhaus*, Vienna's social organisation for homeless people, you have a lot of experience with residential building and have been involved with this subject for a long time. As the designers of the *neunerhaus* were you able to learn something from the residents, from the homeless people?

MR: What everyone needs and wants is privacy, respect, a home and a place where they can be reached. This is just as true for homeless people. Everyone would like to decide for themselves who comes to visit

# ACCOMMODATION AS A BASIC RIGHT

Homelessness is neither an isolated fate nor an isolated problem. This is why innovative and promising long-term approaches seek to offer support on a number of levels, not least through high-quality architecture.

A conversation with the social scientist and *neunerhaus* CEO Markus Reiter and the architect Christoph Lammerhuber about the causes of increasing homelessness, the importance of having one's own postbox and new ideas for the housing estates of the 1960s and 70s.



More than a shelter, built by *WBV-GPA*: At *neunerhaus* Hagenmüllergasse in Vienna 79 formerly homeless people receive privacy, autonomy and a home.

stand why one should question the ability of homeless people to do this. Everyone knows how to live in a home.

CM: How can one imagine a life without an address or a legal status?

bathe and no door to close behind you. But without a postbox or address where you can be reached, legally or formally, things also quickly become complicated. Only when you have spent some time without an address do you become aware of what the social state expects of its citizens.

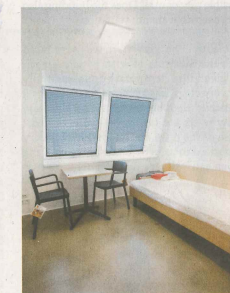
truth is that those who move in here have had to make do without these self-evident things for a considerable period of time.

MR: The residents were indeed all homeless – but they have different backgrounds. These are often crises such as debts, dis-

in a park. Many come from "hidden homelessness". This particularly affects women – who have often accepted terrible conditions in order not to be homeless. Many initially find such temporary solutions on a friend's couch: The social network is used first. But even the strongest network has holes. In order to get quickly back on one's feet one then needs quick and qualitative help.

CL: This is why I believe that projects like the *neunerhaus* should apply the highest standards of construction and social care: this, for me, is also a form of fairness. I find it perfidious that people from a whole range of professions are using the refugee crisis as an excuse for suddenly reducing standards that we have spent centuries resolutely establishing. One hears that we don't need to build lifts in student and refugee accommodation because they are "in any case young and have no problem walking." In socio-political terms it is pathetic to act as if we are already doing too much for homeless people. Why are these people in this situation? Nobody chooses homelessness.

CM: Accommodation is one of the main basic needs and can't be granted temporarily or made subject to certain conditions. Quite apart from the moral and political



arguments there are also practical or therapeutic reasons for this: constant helplessness prolongs crises. In order to regain control of their lives, those affected require stable conditions.

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MR: What everyone needs and wants is privacy, respect, a home and a place where they can be reached. This is just as true for homeless people. Everyone would like to decide for themselves who comes to visit or whether or not to take a letter from the postbox. And doubly important for our clients is the opportunity to retreat into their own private space. I would like to disagree with this notion that one can forget how to live in a home. I don't under-

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CM: How can one imagine a life without an address or a legal status?

MR: Living on the street is an extreme, exceptional situation. People on the street find themselves in many sorts of crisis situations: psychological and physical. Life becomes extremely taxing if you have no living space with a private place to cook or

bathe and no door to close behind you. But without a postbox or address where you can be reached, legally or formally, things also quickly become complicated. Only when you have spent some time without an address do you become aware of what the social state expects of its citizens.

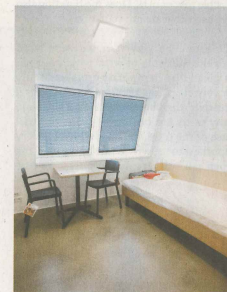
CM: *neuerhaus* Hagenmüllergasse, which was opened in June 2015, is one of three *neuerhaus* residential buildings in Vienna. It offers everything that one would expect of "normal" living but the

truth is that those who move in here have had to make do without these self-evident things for a considerable period of time.

MR: The residents were indeed all homeless – but they have different backgrounds. These are often crises such as debts, dismissals, divorces or the death of someone close – and when such things happen simultaneously things can go downhill very fast. It is important to remember that homelessness doesn't always mean that someone has spent a long time living on the street or

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MR: Yes. But we also have to change something about the roots of the problem. We are stuck in a crisis of distribution. The economy is suffering and this affects incomes. Public resources are declining and housing is becoming ever more expensive, not least as a result of privatisation.

## MORE PLACES FOR PEOPLE

If a household that is already in a crisis situation then loses one income, things can happen quickly and basic needs can no longer be met. We must find differentiated ways of discussing the problem of how to create affordable living space. In addition to the question of how to affordably build good-quality residential buildings, we must also ask why people's incomes are so low. We have calculated that around a third of people in the lowest income segment have to bear an average accommodation cost load of over 40 per cent. This means that they are threatened by the loss of this accommodation!

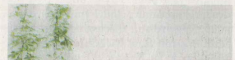
CM: In the interest of fairness one must also say that, due to Vienna's complicated and partly almost byzantine tenancy regulations, there are also many people who pay very little for a lot of living space.

MR: That is true, which is why we also campaign for easier access to affordable living space for homeless people. But we must also do something in the area of new building. Another reason why building is so expensive is that no one wants to take responsibility for risks in such areas as fire protection. But quality must not suffer. One cannot make external walls 15 centimetres thinner just in order to cut costs. This also explains why people acknowledge the high quality offered by the *neuerhaus*. People see and feel this value and are more motivated to take their lives into their own hands.

CM: Because of your special expertise you were able to formulate a very precise brief for the competition. The quality achieved in the building has much to do with the fact that you knew exactly what was important and what has proven to be worthwhile.

MR: That "we" is not just the *neuerhaus* organisation or the social workers but also the residents. It was very important to me that they were involved in the design of the building from the very start.

CM: How were the users involved in the design process?



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out any specific spatial information. In comparison with the other more classical competition entries did our design surprise you?

MR: We chose you because in your presentation you established a very specific way of communicating with us. In the discussion it was also clear that we had a common understanding.

CM: Although this common understanding is a central requirement for the success of a project it is often underestimated.

CL: It was very unusual for us to have a client in the classic sense. We are more used to somewhat anonymous clients such as banks or housing associations who then pass on a project to an equally anonymous building manager as soon as it has been developed and built. This means that there is

they are just as valuable as we are. We can only help when those affected are ready for this. This requires time and trust but neither instructions nor control. Of course we feel pressure from public bodies but there is a difference between stipulation and support.

CM: So you are self-critical enough to know that care also has this "disciplining" aspect and this is how you keep this in check.

MR: Professionals from a number of fields work in *neuerhaus*. Our approach is holistic. It is not just a question of social work but also of support from doctors and psychologists. It is also important that residents also take responsibility for themselves - at both the small and large scale. Our tenants are invited to help with the cleaning or cooking. This is just as important as the communication zones. We

beds. My belief is that we managed more than the minimum.

MR: And although we naturally made every effort on their behalf our employees are the least satisfied, probably because they sense that they don't play the main role in this building. They are actually just guests and the fact that they feel this is, for me, a form of positive feedback.

CM: The building feels like a good tool that offers answers to many current needs. What will happen if these change in the future? How adaptable is the building?

CL: This can be seen in, amongst other things, the structure: the entire building consists of just a load-bearing external skin and a few internal columns. If we find out in ten years that the units should only have 12 square metres or that the homeless don't need any more help then everything can be changed easily.

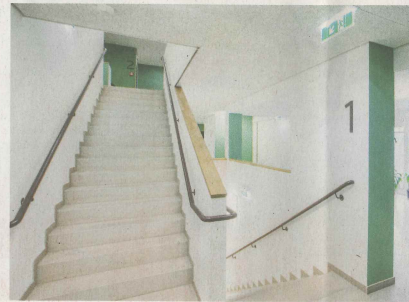


well because, thanks to Otto Wagner, it has an urban infrastructure which was planned for a projected population of four million.

CL: The estates on the edge of the city from the 1960s date back to Roland Rainer. One often forgets why they were built in the first place. In his 1963 design concept for Vienna Roland Rainer said that life in the nineteenth-century tenement block was inhuman because so many people there lived without water and electricity. He proposed these peripheral estates in order to allow the nineteenth-century districts to be refurbished.

MR: In the inner city this led to people being displaced. The assumption is that such developments are always positive and that distribution always follows. But this is no longer the case. The crisis of distribution is leading to the fact that some of the displaced can no longer even find a place for themselves on the periphery and end up homeless.

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very little direct and personal feedback from either the client or the residents, which is naturally a great disadvantage. In the case of *neuerhaus* we had a concrete counterpart who had clear ideas and with whom we could debate.

MR: It was important to us that the architects were able to gather feedback at an early stage in the shape of workshops with the users of two other *neuerhaus* resi-

don't understand this encouragement of self-responsibility in the neo-liberal sense that they must support themselves in order to be able to repay the benefits handed out by the state. We invest in the quality of the support in order to get away from control mechanisms. A lot of money in the social sector is invested in control.

CM: The apartments in *neuerhaus* are small. This means that more people can

**The carers should act as much as possible like guests rather than proprietors: knock, wait to see if someone opens the door and never disturb.**

CM: Homeless people use the city intensively and are - or at least this is what one imagines - people who move around the city a lot. What is the relationship between the *neuerhaus* and its urban environment? How important is it that the building has the infrastructure to meet all its own needs or can the urban infrastructure also provide some of this?

MR: I think that the location of *neuerhaus* Hagenmüllergasse in the heart of the third district is an excellent way of countering the tendency to banish homeless people from the city and out towards the periphery. I fought for six years to be able



MR: We asked users their opinions in workshops. The questions were formulated very concretely and concerned functions and the design of communicative encounters in the building. This enabled us to avoid such issues as whether the building should be painted yellow or grey. We also gathered information in a series of steps about how they envisaged the interior and the exterior of the building and their own living spaces.

CL: These were largely descriptions of how life was lived on a daily basis with-

#### About neunerhaus

Ever since it was founded in 1999 the social organisation has pursued the objective of sustainably helping homeless people through empowerment and through the provision of a home, medical care and other high-quality services. Social workers provide support where required but the aim is for the residents to be independent as possible. To this end they have their own key and the freedom to invite visitors, keep pets and drink alcohol. In addition to this, the aid organisation campaigns for the improvement of policies in the areas of health, social policy and housing in the interest of Vienna's poorest people – its homeless. The organisation neunerhaus is led by one of the founders of the initiative, the social economist Markus Reiter.

[www.neunerhaus.at](http://www.neunerhaus.at)

dential buildings in Vienna and also that they were able to repeatedly present their ideas and discuss these openly.

CM: Can I assume that pool Architekten basically act in this way because you understand architecture as a social discipline?

CL: Yes, that's right. From my point of view architecture has been in a fundamental crisis for quite some time: if, for instance, some star architect designs a handbag for Louis Vuitton, which, in truth, is something that interests nobody, then this is celebrated as a groundbreaking flagship project whereas housing which, for me, is the architectural crème de la crème, gets far too little attention. In saying this, however, I must emphasise that the socio-political culture of the City of Vienna is comparatively sophisticated. If an organisation such as neunerhaus is trusted by the Vienna Social Fund with the operation of a housing project for homeless people, then this facility will also be awarded housing subsidy. We have done a lot with limited resources but without this subsidy we would never have even been able to start at all.

MR: The result is also a statement by the city authorities about the solution to homelessness in the city. There is nothing comparable in the whole of Austria

CM: An important factor in this success and also in the role of the building as a model is the support that you offer.

MR: Here we developed a really clever concept. More than anything else our objective in the neunerhaus is: living as normally as possible. The carers should act as much as possible like guests rather than proprietors: knock, wait to see if someone opens the door and never disturb. Even when offering socio-political counselling we act as equals and everything that we offer is voluntary and never based on compulsion. It goes without saying that most homeless people want to live independently and of their own accord but the aid system still seems dominated by the notion that these people aspire to living in shared accommodation. In the meantime we know that this is only true in a small number of cases. As neunerhaus our opinion is that support can only succeed if it doesn't anticipate the actions of the people it is supporting. One opens perspectives and people realise that

live here but, at the same time, this should not be seen as an expression of frugality. How do you achieve this balance?

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CL: Good living space is not necessarily a question of size and, in any event, in the case of residential space it is the immediate living environment which is particularly important. Hence we were able to create spaces next to the apartments which, on first appearance, may not seem very practical: small, half-open spaces containing two chairs. You get out of the lift, look out, know that you are on the third floor and there is still enough room here to meet up or read a book. We could certainly have squeezed in another four or five apartments but I think that these intermediate spaces are vital, even if they don't seem very efficient at first glance. In this case these "unnecessary" extras are crucial for the living quality because the living conditions are correspondingly minimal. We spent a long time discussing the minimum requirements for the fittings: wardrobe, kitchen, bathroom, table, chairs,

to realise this project downtown. This has something to do with participation and with the question of how the city deals with this issue. Our other two buildings are also well situated in the tenth and the nineteenth districts. This simplifies participation in the life of society and our buildings are very well integrated in their respective neighbourhoods. This is very important to us. Because even if we offer an infrastructure in the building – such as doctors or a cafeteria or suchlike – we want to encourage our residents to use the "normal" offerings of the city in line with their capacity to do so.

CM: Which other forms of exclusion do you see?

CL: In the past forty years hundreds of millions of euros have been invested in the refurbishment of Vienna's late nineteenth-century building stock. This is an insane amount of money and has led to an explosion in prices. Where can the student from Linz, the Syrian refugee and the Bosnian labourer now live? As there are hardly any sub-standard apartments any more, these groups are increasingly being forced into local authority housing.

MR: The opportunities for affordable living in this city are steadily disappearing. And one must meet certain requirements if wants to rent a local authority apartment.

CL: This is why we are looking intensely at the large housing estates of the 1960s and 70s. As they belong to the city they also have certain development potential that we are currently investigating as part of a research project. Basically, these estates are models of success. The fact that 50 per cent of the residents are now pensioners signifies that the first generation is still living there. Most are satisfied and dissatisfaction is usually limited to the fact that the children playing in the green areas disturb the pensioners' peace and quiet. These estates are currently experiencing change processes which the late nineteenth-century parts of the city already have behind them.

CM: For many years Vienna was a shrinking city and one never expected the growth that we are experiencing today. Despite this, however, the city is dealing with this

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CL: Accommodation is primarily a challenge in terms of distribution policy. In the late nineteenth century fifty people were living in space which today is occupied by two.

MR: We cannot compare the situation with that of a century ago but we are currently experiencing a huge rise in the incidence of precarious living conditions and the number of people who are facing the threat of becoming homeless due to the burden of high living costs. In Vienna around 150,000 households have housing costs which are simply too high. We must find a politico-economic way of driving up lower incomes. But the impact of market mechanisms on residential building continues to grow while the availability of basic infrastructure continues to diminish. This is why we base our work on the premise that accommodation is a basic right – a human right. This implies that this should not be exposed to pure economic mechanisms. When housing is built one should be able to speak about quality and urban meaning. Price should not be the paramount issue.

#### About pool Architektur

The office, which was established by four partners including Christoph Lammhuber (\*1966) in 1999 and now has a staff of 15, sees the design of housing as the architect's most important role and has presented numerous projects in this area which successfully test the increasingly rigid regulations to the limit. With its clever design, the new neunerhaus Hagenmüllergasse offers accommodation to 79 instead of the earlier 59 inhabitants and, with its cafeteria and group practice of doctors and therapists, has the space required for the optimal implementation of the building's innovative support concept.

[www.pool-arch.at](http://www.pool-arch.at)