

PALACES OF THE FUTURE

THE SIEDLER MOVEMENT IN VIENNA, 1919-1923

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The great housing blocks financed and built by the Viennese municipality between 1923 and 1934 have long been celebrated as symbols of a progressive and benevolent Social Democracy in action. But the launching of the first five year housing plan in 1923, which centered on the construction of these massive new housing projects, marked a decisive move away from the grassroots socialism of the *Siedlerbewegung* (settlers' movement) that had sprung up in the period just after the First World War. Beginning with a series of temporary camps for the homeless, the *Siedler* movement, which focused on the construction of a series of low density garden city developments, quickly became one of the most vibrant forces on the political left in early postwar Vienna. Although the "settlers" sought financial support from the city authorities and enlisted the assistance of a number of leading architects (including Adolf Loos, Josef Frank, Franz Schuster, and Margarete Lihotzky) the essence of the settlement program was the building of simple and functional row houses by the "settlers" themselves — a remarkable example of a "socialism from below."

The *Siedler* movement had its origins in the closing years of the First World War. Because of increasing food shortages after 1916, many Viennese began to grow food on any open piece of land they could find.¹ Large unbuilt parcels of land such as the Schmelz, a field on the city's western edge that had been used for troop training, were covered with small gardens. Shortages of fuel also prompted the city's inhabitants to begin cutting the nearby forests, which opened up additional land for planting. By the winter of 1918-1919 soldiers returning from the fronts and others unable to find adequate housing in a city already swelled with refugees took matters into their own hands. Desperate for shelter and food, and emboldened by the successful revolution, they occupied fields and woods on the city's periphery, building shacks and planting small vegetable gardens. By the end of 1919, whole makeshift villages or *Bretteldörfer* (literally, board towns) had grown up on open land around the city, many acquiring fanciful or hopeful names such as "Aus eigener Kraft" (On our own power), "Eden," "Neu-Florida," "Neu-Hawaii," "Neuland" (New land), "Vorwärts," (Forward), "Zukunft," (Future).²

The *Siedler* movement, as Adolf Loos later recorded, "fell over all of the city's inhabitants like a fever."³ Lured by the prospects of having their own land and escaping the city's expensive, dreary and badly overcrowded

tenements, thousands were caught up in the euphoria of the *Siedlung* "epidemic." Socialist journalist Max Winter, writing in the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, captured the prevailing mood:

*Unconquerable is he who has a connection to the land! The worker has now become the settler! He builds houses, lays out streets and gardens; his wife no longer goes to the factory, she is no longer a home-worker; she uses her energy as a gardener and to raise small animals. And the children are outside in the healthy sun and air. And their eyes can look over the landscape—and no longer down the narrow alleys—and see the far away land of fulfillment, the highest dream of humanity, the realization of a socialist culture!*⁴

Within a short time the *Siedler* movement also emerged as a potent political force. During the bleak winter of 1918-1919, many of the *Siedler* had formed self-governing unions, loosely modeled on the workers' councils of revolutionary Russia and Germany, and by early 1919 they began to appeal to the city authorities for additional land, as well as building materials and technical support. In November 1920, a number of these groups of *Siedler* and small gardeners banded together and formed the Gemeinnütze Kleingarten-Siedlungs Genossenschaft Altmannsdorf und Hetzendorf (Altmannsdorf and Hetzendorf small gardeners and settlers cooperative) and elected railroad worker and active unionist Adolf Müller as their leader. Müller emphasized the importance of using the new settlements as a means to further the goals of socialism. "A settlement," he wrote, "is not merely a collection of individual houses and a few gardens, but an integrated grouping of gardens and houses, with all the necessary cultural institutions, an assembly house, a cooperative store, playgrounds, daycare facilities, and so forth."⁵

The Social Democratic leadership, nevertheless, was initially unsure of how they should deal with the rising tide of "wild" settlements. During the prewar period, the Socialist party had been decidedly "work place oriented" in both theory and practice, and had paid little attention to housing issues.⁶ Indeed, the party's official stance before the war had been that a solution to the city's housing misery was only possible in a socialist state; the phrase "only socialism will dispose of the housing misery"

was still in use within the party well after it had come to power after the war.⁷ Some within the party hierarchy, recognizing what seemed to be a genuinely “proletarian” political movement, wanted to embrace the settlers. But many were concerned that the settlements could form a serious impediment to the implementation of a comprehensive, party-organized housing program.⁸

Despite the enthusiastic support of the settlers by Otto Bauer, Max Winter, Max Ermers, and other prominent party members, the Socialists largely ignored the *Siedler* in the early postwar period. That began to change, however, in the winter of 1920-1921, when it became clear that the conservative bourgeois parties might assume the leadership of the *Siedler* movement. The Socialists then quickly pushed legislation through the Nationalrat aimed at supporting the settlers' efforts. Many, however, continued to worry privately that the lack of discipline and organization among the various *Siedler* groups would undermine the party's larger housing reform efforts.

This view was articulated by the economist and philosopher Otto Neurath, who in 1921 became the head of the newly-formed Österreichischer Verband für Siedlungs- und Kleingartenwesen (Austrian Union of Settlers and Small Gardeners). Neurath, writing the same year, warned that there were only two possibilities for the *Siedler* movement: either it would devolve into a welter of petit bourgeois associations (*kleinbürgerliche Vereinsmeierei*) or be organized on a broad basis within the Socialist party structure.⁹ The Verband für Siedlungs- und Kleingartenwesen, which served as an umbrella organization for the more than 200 settlers' cooperatives in the country, was an attempt to harness the energies of the *Siedler* and to integrate them into the larger efforts of the Socialist party. Under Neurath's energetic leadership the Verband quickly developed into a formidable organization, effectively lobbying the municipal and federal governments for land, building supplies, and financial support. In addition to its function as a clearing house for information and funds, the Verband operated an architectural planning office, headed by Franz Schuster, which was responsible for overseeing the design of all of the *Siedlungen*. Josef Frank, Hugo Mayer, Franz Schacherl, Margarete Lihotzky, and other architects provided assistance to the various housing cooperatives by volunteering their services or working for nominal fees. Aside from helping plan future developments, they gave lectures on building techniques and planning to the some of the many *Siedler* groups. In the fall of 1921, the Verband began an informal school to instruct the various *Siedler* organizations in the practice of building. Nineteen different courses were offered, taught by the organization's staff and volunteers, including a class on the economic issues of the settlement movement taught by Neurath, one on construction taught by Frank, and one on furnishing the settlement house taught by Lihotzky.

Over the next several years, the various *Siedler* groups managed to erect some 30 cooperative housing projects, including the *Siedlungen* of Rosenhügel, Hermeswiese, Kriegerheimstätten, Flötzersteig, Glanzing, Eden, Mein Heim, Aus eigener Kraft, Lainzer Tiergarten, Wolfersberg, Trautes Heim, Laa am Berg, Heuberg, Schafberg, Denglerschnaze, and Triesterstraße.¹⁰ In most

instances only slightly more than half of the total cost was borne by the *Siedler* themselves: 40% was paid by the cooperative, and another 15% was covered by the labor of the *Siedler* (typically up to 2,500 hours of labor). The remainder of the construction costs came in the form of a subvention from the Vienna municipal government.

The early settlement projects were quite small; individual plots covered about 350 to 400 square meters, and the houses ranged from 48 to about 64 square meters. The plans for the settlements were strictly regulated as were the building sites. Most of the settlements were based on two-story row houses. The ground floor was occupied by a living area and kitchen, while the upper floor typically featured two to three bedrooms. All of the spaces were minimal: the stairways were generally limited to a width of 90 centimeters so that it was necessary to feature a large second story window so that furniture could be installed. The height of each story was limited to 2.60 meters.

In 1921, the Vienna municipal authority, which was dominated by the Socialists, also set up a separate department charged with overseeing the *Siedlungen*. Adolf Loos was appointed its director and chief architect.¹¹ At first the city *Siedlung* office offered only advice, building materials, and limited financial support, but over the next two years it became increasingly involved in the construction of housing settlements, gradually supplanting the grass-roots housing cooperatives. Between 1920 and 1926 a number of new settlements were financed and built by the municipality, many of them designed by leading architects, including Schuster, Frank, Heinrich Tessenow, and Hugo Mayer.

The city continued to plan and build settlements through the early 1930s. But by the end of 1923, it was already becoming clear that the *Siedlung* movement was beginning to lose momentum. One reason for its decline was the steadily improving economic situation. With the Allied blockade now removed, the food scarcity abated and the importance of having gardens diminished. Of even more consequence was the changing political situation. Many within the Socialist party hierarchy were dissatisfied with the *Siedlung* program. Citing the high costs of construction, the lack of available building space, and the difficulty of integrating the *Siedlungen* into the existing public transportation network, they urged the building office to replace the *Siedlungen* with large high-density blocks. The critics of the *Siedlung* idea pointed out, quite correctly, that Vienna had no tradition of single family housing. Although a narrow band of villas occupied the western and southern edges of the city, even after the turn of the century most middle and upper bourgeoisie families lived in large *Wohnpaläste* (apartment palaces) in the inner city. Attempts at the end of the nineteenth century to introduce suburban developments had failed.¹²

Despite their very different visions of the city, both Camillo Sitte and Otto Wagner, the two leading urban planners in Vienna before the war, had viewed the urban apartment block as the basis for future development.¹³ As early as 1920 Leopold Bauer, Wagner's successor at the Academy of Fine Arts, had called on the city authorities to end the *Siedlung* program in favor of large multi-story housing blocks. Bauer argued that the *Siedlungen* were

neither economical nor practical, nor could they effectively satisfy the Social Democrats' mission to transform the world of the working class. The city, Bauer maintained, had a responsibility to fulfill not only the housing needs of the masses, but also the "most important demands of daily life." The housing problem should be solved only "in the spirit of the idea of socialization" (*im Sinne der Idee der Sozialisierung*). The *Siedlungen*, he contended, could never satisfy the needs of the masses for communal facilities such as laundries, kindergartens, cultural centers, and health clinics. For Bauer, the single-family house also had other disadvantages: because of its larger size, it forced women to spend more time with housework, leaving them fewer hours to devote to their families and to leisure. Bauer reckoned that to solve the housing problem some 150,000 apartments would be necessary, and that such an effort would only be possible under a city-managed program. He argued for a program to construct high-density housing blocks, similar to the existing tenements, each with its own garden. In response to those who advocated single-family houses, Bauer retorted, "For every family a dwelling (not a house!) with a garden!"¹⁴

Supporters of the *Siedlung* idea, however, countered that high-density blocks were not necessarily cheaper, nor did the construction of *Siedlungen* preclude the sort of social amenities Bauer championed. Loos, Frank, Schuster, and others who had long supported the *Siedlungen* also touted another reason for continuing the garden city developments: the direct contact with the land and the much lower-density of the *Siedlungen* offered substantial health benefits (in a city where tuberculosis infected as many as one in every four inhabitants). Frank also saw other advantages. Like many other Austrians on the political left who had come from the ranks of the upper middle class, he viewed socialism as a way to liberate individuals so that they could cultivate leisure pursuits once reserved for the well-to-do. For Frank, the Socialists' mission was to create a "new man" from the proletariat by providing access to bourgeois culture in theater, music, literature, and the fine arts. The single-family house was the first step in this direction, providing unprecedented comfort and opportunities for leisure.¹⁵

But if Frank saw in the *Siedlung* house "a piece of democracy come true," many within the Socialist Party leadership viewed the suburban settlements as reactionary.¹⁶ As early as 1912 Rudolf Müller had warned that single-family houses would undermine the party's efforts to organize and forge solidarity in the ranks of the working class, and weaken "class interests."¹⁷ In the postwar housing debate, others echoed Müller's fears, arguing that if the workers became too comfortable a gradual erosion of working class consciousness would result, which would weaken the Socialist movement, and perhaps even threaten the existence of the party.

In 1923, in an effort to elicit greater support for the *Siedlung* movement and to convince city officials to dedicate at least some of the open land on the city's periphery for low density *Siedlungen*, the Österreichischer Verband für Siedlungs- und Kleingartenwesen commissioned Loos, along with Frank,

Peter Behrens, Josef Hoffmann, and Oskar Strnad, to draw up a development scheme for the city. They devised a plan dividing the city into two principal zones: one for high-density housing blocks, which included most of the older central city; and another for a belt of low-density row house *Siedlungen* on the city's outer edge.¹⁸ Some of the plan's specific proposals were eventually adopted; but the effort to encourage the city authorities to expand the *Siedlung* program proved to be of little avail.

At about the same time the *Siedlung* office mounted a large exhibition of model houses in front of the Vienna City Hall. Although it was well-attended and many of the leading Socialists visited or spoke at the opening ceremonies, the exhibit failed to awaken more than token interest in the *Siedlung* idea.¹⁹ Loos, Neurath, Frank, and others continued to hold out in favor of single-family housing. But it was becoming increasingly evident to all that the day of the *Siedlungen* was over. Because of continuing financial problems the Verband für Siedlungs- und Kleingartenwesen was forced to close its building and planning office at the end of 1924, and in July of the following year Neurath decided to step down as the organization's director.

During the early planning phase of the city-directed housing program it was understood that one-third of the new housing constructed would be single-family housing, the remainder large housing blocks. However, as early as 1922 the municipal government had decided to place its main effort into constructing large multi-story housing blocks.

The decision to scale back the construction of new *Siedlungen* was seen as a serious blow by its supporters. Loos, deeply disappointed about the decision and unhappy about a general lack of support from the municipal authorities, resigned his post as chief architect of the housing office in July 1924 and moved to Paris, where he remained until the late 1920s.

In September 1923, the Socialist city council voted to launch a five-year housing program to build 5,000 housing units. To the surprise of nearly all, the plan was fulfilled in the first year, and in 1924 the council introduced a new five-year program calling for the erection of an additional 25,000 apartments. The housing projects were financed by a so-called House Rent Tax (*Hauszinssteuer*) as well as a series of steeply progressive luxury taxes. Apartments in the new complexes were allotted on the basis of need, with preference given to the homeless, those with large families, and disabled veterans. To save on construction costs and provide the maximum number of housing units, the apartments were small: in the early years of the program most of the flats were one of two basic types, one with 40 square meters and the other with 50 square meters. In 1926 a third type, with 60 square meters, was introduced. All of the apartments had running water and toilets, but baths in most instances were provided in centrally-located groups. Some of the early housing projects also had communal kitchens, but the idea proved impractical and was soon abandoned. Many of the complexes housed meeting rooms, medical and dental clinics, gymnasiums, libraries, schools or kindergartens, or recreation rooms; some of the largest complexes also

contained cooperative stores, post offices, cafes, and shops.

Despite the amenities provided by the larger housing blocks, however, proponents of the *Siedlung* idea continued to extol the advantages of the low-density garden city developments. In an article entitled "Der Volkswohnungspalast" (The people's palace) Frank questioned the appropriateness of building "palaces" for an urban working class.²⁰ The formal vocabulary of the great housing blocks – towers, monumental gates, battlements – Frank argued, belonged to the symbolic domain of the old aristocracy; they were an expression of feudalism, not of a republic. Societies in which a bourgeoisie was ascendant, "Athens, Republican Rome, the German cities of the Middle Ages," did not erect palaces, Frank wrote.²¹ Not only was the formal language of the *Volkswohnungspaläste* unsuitable for Socialist Vienna, but the desire to "maintain the appearance" of grandeur led to a terrible waste, both of space and building materials. The best living space, he argued, "does not consist of the number or size of the rooms," but the quality of life that they enable. The alternative to the housing blocks, Frank reaffirmed once again, was the single-family house:

We were perhaps already much closer to [our ideal] than today: that is the Siedler house. It is the dream of every Anglo-Saxon person one day to own a house with a garden. To which we should add: every free person. "A small house, with a maximum of two stories. ... that is the palace of the future!"²²

But by 1926, when Frank wrote "Der Volkswohnpalast," the day of the *Siedlungen* had already passed. While the actual number of *Siedlung* houses continued to grow during the 1920s, their percentage of the city's entire building program decreased steadily: in 1921 *Siedlung* houses accounted for slightly more than half of the housing units built; in 1923 they made up less than a third; and by 1925 they constituted only four per cent of the total.²³ *Siedlungen* continued to be built well into the 1930s, but it was the great housing blocks that became the concrete representations of the experiment of Red Vienna.

The *Siedler* movement represents an unusual and instructive example of "building as a political act." Here the political impetus came not from a central authority, as is so often the case, but from a broadly-based coalition of homeless workers, returning soldiers and refugees. In a curious and ironic twist, it was the Socialist party leadership, in an effort to reassert its authority, that ultimately put an end to the movement. The rise and fall of the *Siedler* movement suggests that while political and social forces affect the built environment they sometimes do so in complex, shifting, and unexpected ways.

NOTES

¹ Otto Neurath, *Österreichs Kleingärtner- und Siedlerorganisation* (Vienna, 1923), p. 5.

² Helmut Weihsmann, *Sozialdemokratische Architektur und Kommunalpolitik 1919-1934* (Vienna: Promedia, 1985), pp. 114-15. On the origins of the *Kleingarten* idea in Vienna, see

Wilfried Posch, *Die Wiener Gartenstadt Bewegung. Reformversuch zwischen erster und zweiter Gründerzeit* (Vienna: Tusch Urbanistica, 1981).

³ Adolf Loos, "Wohnen Lernen!" *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, May 15, 1921, reprinted in *Trotzdem* (Innsbruck: Brenner-Verlag, 1931; rpt. Vienna: Georg Prachner Verlag, 1982), p. 165.

⁴ "Unüberwindlich ist, wer mit dem Boden Zusammenhang hat. Der Arbeiter wird Siedler! Er baut Häuser, legt Straßen und Gärten an, seine Frau geht nicht mehr in die Fabrik, sie ist nicht mehr Heimarbeiterin, sie verwertet ihre Kraft daheim als Gärtnerin, als Kleintierzüchterin. Und die Kinder werden draußen gesunden in der Luft. Und frei wird ihr Blick über das Gelände fliegen, der in die Enge der Gasse gebannte Blick, der nun in die Weite fliegen kann, in das trotz allem noch immer ferne Land der Erfüllung des höchsten Kulturtraumes der Menschheit, der Erfüllung der sozialistischer Kultur!" Max Winter, "Wie eine Siedlung wird," *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, November 11, 1923.

⁵ "Eine Siedlung ist nicht ein Haufen einzelner Häuser mit ein paar Ziergärten, sondern eine geschlossene Gruppe von Nutzgärten mit Wohngebäuden nebst allen kulturellen Einrichtungen, wie: Genossenschaftsraum, Konsumverein, Spielplätze, Kinderkrippen usw." Adolf Müller, "Die Siedlungsbewegung," *Der Betriebsrat* 1. (1921), p. 261.

⁶ Peter Marcuse, "The Housing Policy of Social Democracy: Determinants and Consequences," in *The Austrian Socialist Experiment: Social Democracy and Austromarxism, 1918-1934*, edited by Anson Rabinbach. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1985), p. 205.

⁷ Marcuse, p. 204.

⁸ Robert Hoffmann, "Nimm Hack' und Spaten..." *Siedlung und Siedlerbewegung in Österreich 1918-1938* (Vienna: Verlag für Gesellschaftskritik, 1987), p. 62.

⁹ Otto Neurath, "Kleingärtner und Siedler — Neue Wirtschaft, neues Leben," *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, November 20, 1921.

¹⁰ Weihsmann, *Das Rote Wien*, p. 118. For an excellent study of the Rosenhügel project, see Klaus Novy, "'Die Pioniere vom Rosenhügel.' Zur wirklichen Revolution des Arbeiterwohnens durch die Wiener Siedler," *Um Bau* 4 (May 1981), pp. 43-60.

¹¹ Burkhardt Rukschcio and Roland Schachel, *Adolf Loos. Leben und Werk* (Salzburg and Vienna: Residenz Verlag, 1982), pp. 243ff. On Loos's work in the *Siedlung* office, see also Dietrich Worbs, "Die Wiener Siedlerbewegung und die Siedlungen von Adolf Loos in Wien," *Architese* 12 (September-October 1982), pp. 5-12.

¹² During the latter half of the nineteenth century several experimental suburban communities had been built in Vienna, among them an area known as "Cottage," begun in 1873 in the district of Währing. Heinrich von Ferstel, one of the leading Ringstrasse architects, served as architectural advisor. Some 350 houses were eventually constructed, but the idea of single family housing failed to gain popularity among the Viennese middle class, and in later years many of the villas were divided up into apartments. See Donald Olsen, *The City as a Work of Art: London, Paris, Vienna* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 172ff.

¹³ See Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1980), pp. 62-110.

¹⁴ Quoted in Jan Tabor, "Der unsichere Boden der Tradition," *Wien aktuell* 89 (October 1984), pp. 24-25.

¹⁵ See Wilfried Posch, "Die Wiener Gartenstadtbewegung—Der Streit um Wohn- und Hausform," in *Reflexionen und Aphorismen zur österreichischen Architektur*, edited by Viktor Hufnagl (Vienna: Georg Prachner, 1984), p. 342. See also Wolfgang

Förster, "Die Wiener Arbeitersiedlungsbewegung vor dem zweiten Weltkrieg-Eine Alternative zur kommunalen Wohnbauprogramm?" *Der Aufbau* 35 (1980), pp. 405-410.

- ¹⁶ Posch, "Die Wiener Gartenstadtbeugung-Der Streit um Wohn- und Hausform," p. 341.
- ¹⁷ Rudolf Müller, "Die Kehrseite des Eigenhauses," *Der Kampf. Sozialdemokratische Monatschrift* 5 (1912), p. 172, quoted in Robert Hoffmann, "Entproletisierung durch Siedlung? Die Siedlungsbewegung in Österreich 1918 bis 1938," in *Bewegung und Klasse. Studien zur österreichischen Arbeitergeschichte*, edited by Gerhard Botz *et al.* (Vienna: Europa Verlag, 1978), p. 715.
- ¹⁸ Max Ermers, "Groß-Wiens Stadterweiterung und der neue General-Architekturplan," *Der Tag*, November 25, 1923, p. 6; Otto Neurath, "Generalarchitekturplan," *Das Kunstblatt* 7 (April 1924), pp. 105-08.

¹⁹ See the report on the congress, "Der Internationale Wohnungs- und Städtebaukongress in Wien," *Wohnungswirtschaft*. (Berlin) 3 (October 1, 1926), pp. 149-56.

²⁰ Frank, "Der Volkswohnungspalast. Eine Rede anlässlich der Grundsteinlegung, die nicht gehalten wurde," *Der Aufbau* 1 (September 1926), pp. 107-11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 110-11.

²³ Wilfried Posch, "Die Gartenstadtbeugung in Wien," *Bauforum* (Vienna) 13, nos. 77/78 (1980), p. 17. After 1926, the settlements were constructed almost exclusively under the direction of Gemeinwirtschaftliche Siedlungs- und Baustoffanstalt (GESIBA) with the financial support coming directly from the government.