

Vienna's Lost Heritage of *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen*

Tracing Intangible Values of a Post-War Social Housing Experiment

Abstract

In the 1950s, the City of Vienna ventured an experiment in social housing, building one- and two-storey apartment blocks for elderly residents in more than thirty municipal housing estates—an innovative response to the post-war housing crisis and an ageing society. These Alte-Leute-Siedlungen enabled barrier-free, self-determined living within the social fabric of the Gemeindebau (municipal housing), supported by open spaces that fostered social interaction and neighbourly care. Once seen as a model internationally, these settlements are now largely forgotten. Many no longer serve their original purpose, and only a few are protected as heritage. Yet their core idea—age-appropriate housing embedded in supportive urban communities—remains highly relevant. This article calls for renewed recognition of these settlements as a vital part of post-war social housing history and argues that the lessons they offer are essential for addressing today's and tomorrow's housing challenges.

A Housing Experiment – *Gemeindebau* for the Elderly

Vienna's long tradition of municipal housing is deeply rooted in the legacy of “Red Vienna” (1918–1934), which redefined housing as a fundamental right rather than a commodity. This principle underpinned an ambitious municipal housing programme in the interwar period, aimed at improving the living conditions of the working class and fostering social equity. However, this era came to an abrupt end with the rise of Austrofascism in 1934, followed by Austria's annexation by Nazi Germany in 1938.

After World War II, Vienna lay in ruins, and the population faced a severe housing crisis.¹ Determined to build on the achievements of “Red Vienna”, the new city government reaffirmed municipal housing as the cornerstone of the city's reconstruction. In response to post-war scarcity and influenced by international architectural and urban planning trends, the approach shifted towards greater functionality and pragmatism. The monumental superblocks with their enclosed courtyards gave way to the planning principle of the

spacious neighbourhood unit. Dispersed buildings surrounded by open spaces typically ranged from linear blocks (*Zeilenbau*) to detached high-rises, becoming increasingly standardised with the advent of prefabricated construction in the 1960s.

Amid this period of reconstruction pressures and economic constraints, Vienna ventured a pioneering experiment within its municipal housing programme in the 1950s. Over two decades, the municipality built one- and two-storey apartment blocks as part of more than thirty new municipal housing estates. These *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen*² (old people's settlements) provided micro-apartments tailored to the needs of elderly residents. Designed to facilitate barrier-free, self-determined living, they included open spaces that fostered strong neighbourhood ties within the social fabric of the *Gemeindebau* (municipal housing) (Fig. 1).

The *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* emerged as a response to the challenges of the post-war period. In the midst of widespread devastation, Vienna not only faced a severe housing crisis but was also challenged by its demographic profile. The city had one of the world's

1 21% of houses were destroyed and about 90,000 apartments uninhabitable; cf. Peter Marchart, *Wohnbau in Wien 1923–1983*, Wien 1984, p. 30.

2 Officially termed *Heimstätten für alte Leute* (old people's settlements), these complexes were commonly referred to as *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* as well as *Alte-Leute-Stiegen*.



Fig. 1: *Alte-Leute-Siedlung* as part of the municipal housing estate Unter-Meidlinger Straße 16–22, 1120 Wien, photo 1961

oldest populations,³ with its high proportion of elderly residents being especially impacted by the housing shortage. Overcrowded care homes with poor reputation,⁴ along with authorities' concerns about "*growing isolation of elderly people in the metropolis*"⁵ sparked public debate about housing solutions for these groups. It became clear that addressing this issue required more than the efforts of social institutions—it demanded a comprehensive urban development strategy. The *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* were regarded as a viable solution.

The housing experiment soon gained international recognition as a showcase of independent housing for elderly residents. Today, however, this model is largely forgotten. Even though the buildings are still preserved, the original idea behind the settlements has faded from collective memory. However, their intangible qualities—i.e., adequate housing for elderly residents, surrounded by open spaces that fostered a caring neighbourhood—remain highly relevant today.

This model thus offers a distinctive case for exploring the intangible qualities of built heritage—extending beyond physical considerations to include immaterial dimensions embedded within housing. This paper argues for the recognition of the *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* as a key development of Vienna's post-war social housing. By tracing the settlements' original vision and development over time, the research aims to uncover their (im-)material values, thereby providing valuable insights for both reimagining their future and tackling today's housing challenges.

Micro Apartments in the Social Fabric of the *Gemeindebau*

The concept of the *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* goes back to the architect Franz Schuster,⁶ who—as a professor at the Hochschule für angewandte Kunst Wien (today's University of Applied Arts Vienna) and consultant to the City of Vienna—played a key role in post-war municipal housing and urban development. In 1952, Schuster designed the first *Alte-Leute-Siedlung* with 27 units as part of the Siemensstraße-Siedlung in Floridsdorf (Fig. 2). Influenced by the Garden City Movement, he envisioned a neighbourhood that would "*bring people together to form a community*"⁷ by integrating infrastructure for daily life within walking distance.⁸ The Siemensstraße-Siedlung featured a mix of functions, including a kindergarten, grocery store, healthcare facilities, and craft workshops, alongside diverse housing typologies and generous open spaces to accommodate 6,000 residents.⁹ At the time, the press termed it a "*neighbourhood of generations*".¹⁰

Historical references suggest that the idea of the *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* was inspired by rural traditions, where elderly farmers, after passing their farm to the next generation, would move into a small house

3 Low birth rates and increased life expectancy raised the over-65 population from 13.3% in 1951 to nearly 20% by 1971, cf. Statistik Austria, Stadt Wien MA23, <https://wien1x1.at/bev-entwicklung-2/> (01.11.2024).

4 cf. Amtsblatt (1956/35), Paradies „zu ebener Erd"—Wiener Journalisten besichtigen Heimstätten für alte Menschen, in: Amtsblatt der Stadt Wien 35, Wien 02.05.1956, pp. 2 f.

5 Stadt Wien (Ed.), Jahrbuch der Stadt Wien 1964, Wien 1965, p. 177.

6 Schuster was never a member of the NSDAP, yet he was not an untainted figure during the Nazi regime; cf. Christina Wieder, Von der Kunstgewerbeschule zur Reichshochschule für angewandte Kunst 1938–1945, in: Bernadette Reinhold / Christina Wieder (Eds.), „Sonderfall“ Angewandte, Wien 2024, pp. 171 f.

7 Franz Schuster; cf. MA7 – Kulturbteilung der Stadt Wien, Portrait eines Architekten – Franz Schuster, Wien 1972 (Jahn-Film production, black and white, 16 mm, 30:22).

8 The approach aligns with contemporary urban planning concepts, e.g., the “city of short distances” and the “15-minute city”; cf. Carlos Moreno, The 15-minute city: A solution to saving our time and our planet, New Jersey 2024.

9 cf. Franz Schuster, Wohnanlagen für die Gemeinschaft der Menschen, in: Rudolf J. Boeck (Ed.), Heimstätten für alte Menschen. Der Aufbau (29), 1956, pp. 5 f.

10 Arbeiter-Zeitung (Ed.), Wien zeigt sich seinen Freunden. Die schwedischen Gäste besichtigen Wiens Wiederaufbau, 181, Wien 08.08.1951, p. 3.

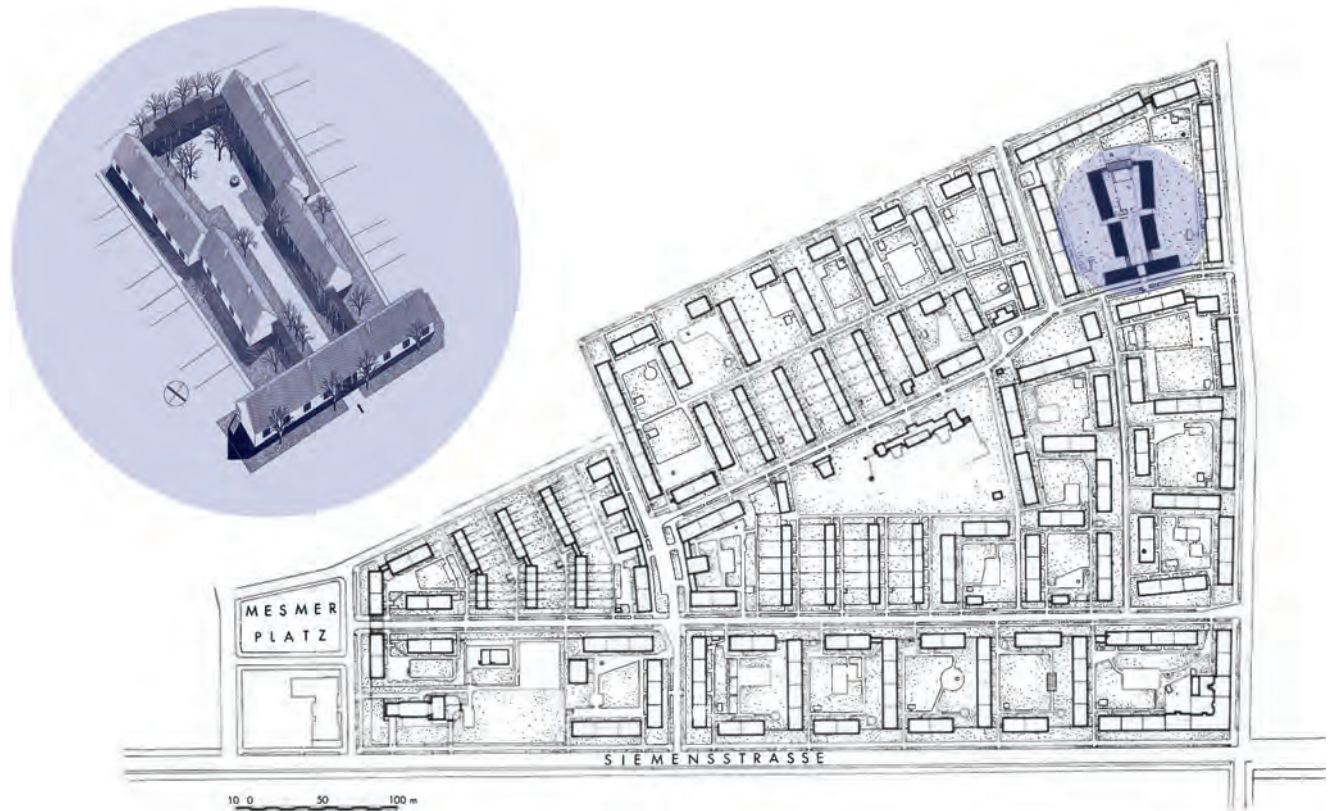


Fig. 2: Franz Schuster's design for the first *Alte-Leute-Siedlung* within the municipal housing estate Siemensstraße, 1210 Wien

nearby.¹¹ Schuster applied this idea to the city by integrating micro-apartments for elderly residents in municipal housing estates, enabling them to downsize their living space. As co-editor of the journal *Der Aufbau* on housing and urban development, Schuster was deeply engaged in international architectural discourse and thus likely also influenced by British council-housing practices, which allocated 12% of living space for elderly people.¹²

The housing experiment expanded rapidly, resulting in around 800 micro-apartments across more than thirty municipal housing estates between 1952 and the late 1960s, primarily in Vienna's outer districts—the key urban development areas at the time.¹³ Strategically located across the city, they allowed elderly residents to maintain independence within familiar surroundings—aligning with today's “ageing in place” approach.¹⁴ Initially, the units were given free of charge;

later, they transitioned to standard rental contracts within the social housing scheme.¹⁵

In contrast to conventional municipal housing, the *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* prioritized low-rise structures to minimize the need for stairs; later complexes, however, had two or even more storeys, likely for economic reasons. On average, each settlement had 20 micro-apartments, ranging from 28 to 38m², depending on whether they were intended for a single resident or a couple (Fig. 3). Units included a living area with a sleeping alcove, small cooking facilities, a washbasin, toilet, storage space, and—though not initially—a shower. Some settlements also had extra units for care workers or communal spaces.¹⁶ Although realised by different architects, the *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* shared a key characteristic: a seamless connection to the surrounding outdoor spaces, thereby extending the living area. Architectural elements such as loggias, verandas,

11 cf. Wiener Stadtbauverwaltung, *Nachbar im Herbst* (Filmdokument VIII), Wien 1956 (Austria Wochenschau film production, colour, 35 mm, 09:22).

12 cf. Eduard Sekler, *Wohnstätten für alte Leute*, in: Wiener Stadtbauamt (Ed.), *Der Aufbau*, 02.1950, pp. 84–86.

13 cf. Stadt Wien (Ed.), *Die Verwaltung der Stadt Wien Berichtsjahr 1970*, Wien 1971, p. 152.

14 cf. World Health Organization (Ed.), *Global age-friendly cities: A guide*, Genf 2007.

15 cf. Stadt Wien (Ed.), *Jahrbuch der Stadt Wien 1953*, Wien 1954, p. 192.

16 cf. Arbeiter-Zeitung (Ed.), *Gemeindewohnbau für Alte. Nun auch in Meidling*, 248, Wien 23.10.1952, p. 3.

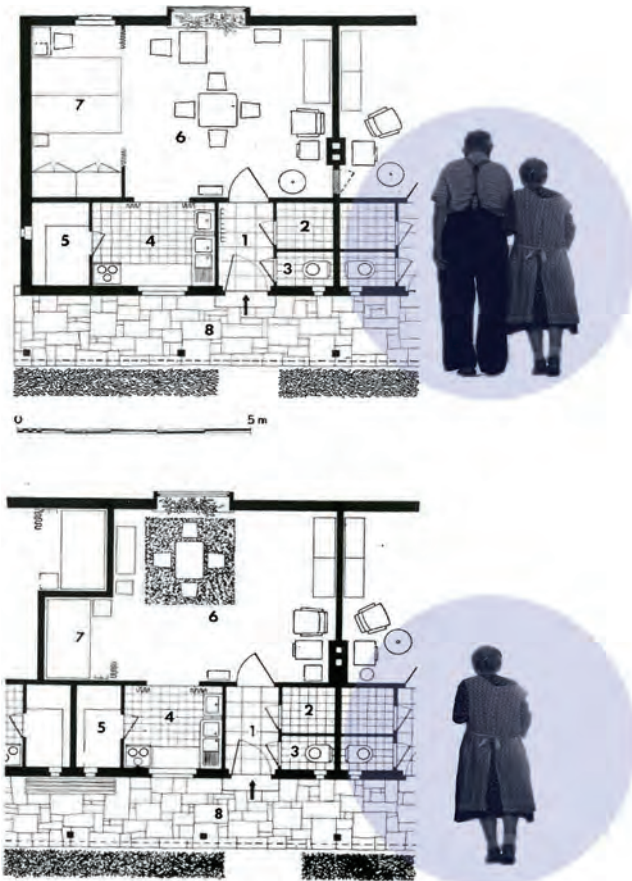


Fig. 3: Typical floor plan of a micro-apartment for elderly singles and couples, exemplified by the *Alte-Leute-Siedlung* in Siemensstraße, 1210 Floridsdorf

and balconies facilitated close ties to the ground level, fostering interaction with neighbours (Fig. 4).

The *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* exemplify the post-war development of social housing, rooted in the “Vienna Model” of the interwar period (“Red Vienna”), which planning authorities described as a transition “from social housing to social urban development”.¹⁷ At the centre of this reorientation was the concept of the so-called “social green”¹⁸—i.e., the integration of generous green spaces accessible to all, intended to loosen up the city and improve urban living quality. Historical



Fig. 4: Seamless connection of the *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* with outdoor spaces, extending the living environment, *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* at Eisenbahnstraße, 1190 Wien, and Karplusgasse, 1100 Wien

images show how the *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* embraced the social green, featuring extensive open spaces with wind- and sun-protected areas, and equipped with benches, tables, and, in some cases, small garden plots. These allowed residents to co-shape their surroundings, empowering a sense of agency and deeper connection to the neighbourhood.¹⁹ The outdoor spaces functioned as micro-centres, cultivating informal networks of support and creating a “caring community” environment—as it would be termed today.²⁰ Witnesses recall that elderly residents cared for each other, describing the atmosphere as “living in a village”.²¹

From Pioneering Model to Relic

The *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* were promoted locally and internationally, highlighting their integration of social policy and urban planning, and soon gained recognition as a pioneering model of social housing for older resi-

17 Kurt Heller, *Der Soziale Wohnungsbau der Gemeinde Wien nach dem Zweiten Weltkriege*, in: Stadtbauamt Wien (Ed.), *Der soziale Wohnungsbau der Stadt Wien*, Der Aufbau 39, 12.1960, pp. 37–39.

18 Stadtbauamtsdirektion (Ed.), *Soziales Grün in Wien*, Der Aufbau 24, 3rd edition, 1963.

19 A study by sociologists Eva Köckeis and Leopold Rosenmayr, commissioned by the City of Vienna to evaluate the first four *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen*, highlights the positive impact of social green on elderly residents’ well-being and neighbourly relations; cf. Leopold Rosenmayr / Eva Köckeis, *Umwelt und Familie alter Menschen*, Wien 1965, p. 97.

20 cf. the current discourse on caring communities, e.g., Angelika Gabauer / Henrik Lebuhn, *New care arrangements and civic innovation*, in: Angelika Gabauer / Sabine Knierbein / Nir Cohen / Henrik Lebuhn / Kim Trogal / Tihomir Videmann / Tigran Haas (Eds.), *Care and the city. Encounters with urban studies*, New York 2022, pp. 165–170.

21 Interview with a resident of Hugo-Breitner-Hof, whose grandparents lived in an *Alte-Leute-Siedlung*, Wien 06.07.2023.

dents.²² However, by the late 1960s, the development of the *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* stagnated as Vienna gradually shifted its focus to large-scale elderly residential homes. Several factors contributed to the experiment's gradual decline: the settlements' limited capacity,²³ criticism from conservative circles advocating the family over institutional settings as the ideal home for elderly persons,²⁴ and the broader architectural trend towards pre-fabricated high-rise construction. By 1975, annual administrative reports ceased to record data on the *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen*, with the housing model fading into obscurity. Today, the settlements are treated like any other post-war municipal housing estates, with only their physical structures remaining as a distant echo of the original vision.

Tracing the Built Remains of *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen*

At the outset of the research project, no comprehensive records existed regarding the locations of the settlements. Neither the current managing authority of the properties (*Wiener Wohnen*) nor the municipal department responsible for their construction (MA19—Architecture and Urban Design) were able to provide detailed information, revealing a gap in the city's institutional memory. Research thus required extensive archival work to identify the settlements' locations and recover information fragmented across numerous municipal files, historical planning documents, housing authority reports, newspapers, and image archives. This was complemented by site visits during which the settlements' architectural features and current conditions were documented. The work culminated in the creation of an inventory, piecing together historical fragments and tracing the experiment's development over time.

Field research revealed that while all the objects remain physically present, their original purpose has largely been lost. They no longer serve as affordable housing specifically for elderly persons; instead, they have been opened to residents of all ages and reportedly attract younger tenants due to the small apartment sizes.²⁵ The condition of the buildings varies

significantly across the sites. Most are in poor condition, sharing the typical fate of post-war architecture. They are nearing the end of their lifecycle and require updates to meet modern standards, especially regarding energy efficiency. Moreover, site visits revealed high vacancy rates, with some of the units converted from residences to private storage spaces. This adaptation is due to the small living area of the units, some of which no longer meet the minimum requirements of municipal social housing. However, exceptions exist: Some settlements have been renovated and upgraded, demonstrating their potential for transformation and continued use.

Only six settlements have received heritage protection, yet only as part of larger municipal housing ensembles rather than as independent entities. An example illustrating the complex and often conflicting dynamics involved in identifying, conserving, adapting, or ultimately the risk of losing housing heritage is the former *Alte-Leute-Siedlung* at Hugo-Breitner-Hof (Fig. 5). Built in 1957, this settlement, comprising 24 units around a garden, has been vacant since 2006. Initially part of the heritage-protected ensemble



Fig. 5: Former *Alte-Leute-Siedlung* at Hugo-Breitner-Hof in 1140 Wien, excluded from the listed ensemble in 2007 and increasingly falling into disrepair

22 Historical sources show that the housing model was promoted through local bus tours for Vienna's citizens, visits by international representatives, exhibitions at venues like Vienna's Messepalast and Washington's National Housing Center, and promotional films screened in local "Wochenschau" cinemas.

23 cf. Helmut Junker, Von der "Gemeindewohnung" zum sozialen Städtebau, in: Amtsblatt der Stadt Wien, Wien 1971, pp. 106–110.

24 cf. Lois Weinberger, Das beste Heim für alte Menschen ist die Familie! (Vortrag zur Geriatrietagung in Bad Hofgastein), in: Amtsblatt der Stadt Wien 34, Wien 27.04.1957, p. 3.

25 Interview with a representative of *Wiener Wohnen*, Wien 09.05.2023.

Hugo-Breitner-Hof, it was excluded from the ensemble in 2007 and has since deteriorated. In 2019, plans for demolition and new construction under the new municipal housing programme (*Gemeindebau Neu*) were announced in the local press, sparking opposition—particularly among the tenants’ advisory board, which raised concerns about the impact of re-densification on living quality. The public administration has since provided no updates, leaving the future of the former *Alte-Leute-Siedlung* uncertain.²⁶

The low appreciation of the *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* reflects a general ambivalence towards post-war architecture—often dismissed as utilitarian and lacking aesthetic distinction. Built under the “*Schnellbauprogramm*”²⁷ (rapid construction programme) during the post-war housing crisis, these settlements prioritised economic efficiency over artistic expression. Acknowledging their value requires a holistic approach that extends beyond physical characteristics and considers the contextual constraints of their time.

Tracing the Intangible Remains of *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen*

Drawing on Swiss sociologist Lucius Burckhardt’s notion that “*design is invisible*”,²⁸ which emphasizes that design transcends the visible to include social, spatial, and cultural practices that define, transform, or sustain its meaning, this research frames housing as a form of “*living heritage*”.²⁹ It shifts the focus from static, object-based perspectives on housing heritage to its intangible dimensions—everyday practices, memories, and narratives—, all of which are central to its essence.

Through this lens, the *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* are evaluated not only for their architecture but also for the social practices and communal aspirations they embody. Despite their fading presence in the city’s memory, traces of these practices can be found in both preserved and lost elements. Small residential units within communal settings enabled elderly residents to balance independence and privacy with participation in neighbourhood life. Features such as verandas and



Fig. 6: Heritage-listed *Alte-Leute-Siedlung* in Steinitzhof (1130 Wien) with a deteriorated central open space that reflects lost communal life—yet holds untapped potential for revitalisation

outdoor benches placed near front doors catered to mobility-impaired residents and encouraged intergenerational interaction. Open spaces, often with small garden plots, fostered engagement with nature. All these elements aimed to counter isolation and create a living environment based on social integration, neighbourly ties, and well-being. These intangible qualities are as integral to the significance of the *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* as the architecture itself.

However, site visits revealed a notable decline in these qualities. Once embedded in a network of public infrastructure, many local amenities have since disappeared, and the open spaces within the estates have fallen into neglect. The current state of the “social green” contrasts starkly with historical photographs showing the original vision of accessible green spaces for all residents. Key social infrastructure, such as urban furniture, has been dismantled—even among the listed ensembles (Fig. 6). A restrictive approach to regulating open spaces—evident for example in signs prohibiting access to green areas and zoning of spaces for specific user groups—contrasts with the original vision.³⁰

26 The example highlights the need for transparent communication and active involvement of residents—as experts of their own environment—in identifying and transforming housing heritage.

27 Stadtbauamt Wien (Ed.), 14 Punkte für den Wiederaufbau. Kurzer Auszug aus den Hauptgerichtspunkten der Enquete für den Wiederaufbau der Stadt Wien. Juli 1945 bis Jänner 1946, Wien 1946.

28 Lucius Burckhardt, *Design is invisible* (1980), in: Jesko Fezer / Martin Schmitz (Eds.), *Lucius Burckhardt writings. Rethinking man-made environments*, Wien 2012, pp. 153–166.

29 cf. UNESCO, *Intangible cultural heritage*, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention> (01.11.2024).

30 cf. Christina Schraml, A plea for the right to conflict. Exploring (A-)social green for all in Vienna’s municipal housing, in: *MONU Magazine for Urbanism* 37, 2024, pp. 98–104.

The loss of both tangible and intangible elements has created a void that weakens the social fabric once nurtured by these municipal housing estates. A careful approach to this housing stock therefore requires a critical re-evaluation of how intangible dimensions of housing can be preserved, reactivated, and adapted to contemporary needs. Such an approach is crucial not only for conserving the essence of the *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* but also for informing future social housing strategies.

From Lost Heritage to the Future

The *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* represent a largely overlooked yet significant chapter in Vienna's social housing history, marking a key phase in the development of the "Vienna Model". While post-war architecture often remains undervalued, these settlements hold intangible qualities that continue to resonate with contemporary housing challenges. In particular, they offer valuable insights into the principles of "ageing in place" and the significance of intergenerational networks of care and social infrastructure—all of which are essential to addressing contemporary issues such as demographic ageing, increasing social isolation, and the erosion of social cohesion. Thus, the *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* not only constitute an important historical legacy but also serve as a source of inspiration for future social housing solutions.

The deteriorating state of many *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen*, coupled with high vacancy rates, presents both a challenge and an opportunity for their future adaptation. Instead of preservation efforts limited to physical conservation of the buildings, a more holistic approach—framed within the concept of "living heritage"—is necessary. Where the original function as residential space is no longer viable due to outdated living standards, new socially meaningful functions must be found. Particularly notable are the generous open spaces, originally conceived as "social green", which hold untapped potential for fostering resilient, climate-adaptive communities, especially amidst the climate crisis. Without an awareness of this intangible heritage, these entire settlements risk becoming hollowed-out, static relics. Involving residents in any transformation process is crucial to ensuring that adaptations reflect evolving needs. Reinterpreted as "living heritage", the *Alte-Leute-Siedlungen* can thus serve as a significant case for community-oriented social housing in the future. Rather than being dismissed as outdated and ripe for demolition, these buildings should be acknowledged as a valuable testing ground, demonstrating how a holistic approach towards housing heritage can inform adaptive reuse strategies, while also fostering caring communities for generations to come.