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# Resisting the financialization of housing in Vienna: Which way forward?

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Johannes Jäger Fachhochschule des BFI Wien

Elisabeth Springler Fachhochschule des BFI Wien

Gefördert von





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# **Abstract**

Vienna is regularly cited as a showcase for the successful provision of affordable housing to a large proportion of the population. The Viennese housing model can only be understood in its specific historical context, shaped by an accumulation model oriented towards productive development and related social struggles. Key institutions such as rent controls, which continue to influence policy today, date back to the First World War. Later, the housing policy of Red Vienna in the 1920s created a substantial share of the large stock of social housing that still exists. In the post-war period, this policy was maintained, while a cooperative housing model was introduced.

From the 1980s and 1990s onwards, however, the decommodified housing system began to erode. The rise of neoliberal ideas and the emergence of new actors promoting the commodification and financialisaton of housing also affected Vienna. Although the end of Red Vienna has often been proclaimed, important institutions of decommodified housing production and provision continue to function effectively today. However, this remains a contested issue in light of current societal demands for affordability and sustainability.

This paper adopts a dual approach to analyse the effects on land prices and increasing financialization in the circulation of housing. Drawing on a critical political economy perspective, particularly land rent theory, it examines housing developments in Vienna, linking the historical trajectory to current urban projects in the production sphere. It explores the conditions under which further commodification and financialization of housing can be resisted and identifies possible progressive ways forward. For the circulation sphere of housing, a post-Keynesian approach is applied, focusing on the financialization of households through rising debt, largely driven by the aspiration of homeownership. These developments have been facilitated by the neoliberal agenda of expanding access to finance via mortgage loans or alternative forms of finance.

#### 1 Introduction

International comparative analyses of housing studies usually find Vienna to perform well - both in terms of quantity and quality of housing, as well as affordability. Total public expenditure capacity for housing subsidies consists of two parts, the housing subsidy contribution which is set up a 1% of the wage amount (approx. 1.4 billion EUR in 2024; Amann et al. 2024) and refunds of outstanding loans for housing finance. Both elements are non-earmarked funds in the competence of the nine Austrian states. The use of the public expenditure capacity varies significantly between the nine Austrian states. While in the last years refunds from outstanding loans and sales of receivables from housing subsidy loans together with an overall low funding volume freed the states from financial pressure, this trend was reversed recently (Amann et al. 2024). In total public expenditure sums up approx. 0.55% of GDP a ratio below OECD average (IIBW 2024). Moreover, social segregation, a major issue in many cities, is significantly less pronounced in Vienna, although there are higher concentrations of migrants in specific districts (cf. Giffinger 1998). However, as Soederberg (2020) shows, the Viennese housing model has also deficiencies and struggles to integrate marginalised groups. Nonetheless, Vienna's housing regime remains more solidaristic than that of many other cities. This is due to the high amount of so-called social housing, with roughly 60% of Viennese citizens living in flats constructed with public housing subsidies. While this can be regarded as a form of decommodification, it does not mean that such housing stock is permanently removed from market forces, but only during the pay-back period of housing subsidies (cf Glaser 2022: 23f). Approximately 40% of the housing stock is continuously decommodified, consisting of around 200,000 municipal housing units and 210,000 units built and owned by limited-profit housing associations (Kumnig/Litschauer 2025:4).

Notwithstanding this, notable changes have occurred in recent decades, although they appear modest compared to more drastic shifts in many other countries. Demand-side components — such as rent allowances for low-income households — have gained increasing importance. Classical supply-side measures and (partially) decommodified forms of access to housing, although still relatively strong, are in decline. In line with this, processes of privatisation and financialisation have also taken place.

What explains both the changes and the continued stability of Vienna's housing model?

While scholars often address this question within a degrowth framework to analyse the potential of limiting socio-spatial inequalities in the existing Viennese housing model (see e.g. Cucca/Friesenecker 2022), or adopt urban planning and social science approaches to commodification (see, among others, Kadi 2015, 2025; Musil et al 2024; Kumnig/Litschauer 2025), an explicitly economic perspective remains underrepresented.

This chapter fills this gap by bringing together a critical political economy and post-Keynesian perspective to shed light on the current situation in Vienna, both in the housing production and circulation sphere (see Glanz et al 2024 for a definition on the importance of production and circulation in housing). A regulationist perspective enables an integrated analysis of changing accumulation strategies and evolving institutional forms. Shifts in accumulation patterns are typically linked to regulatory change. Thus, housing provision can be understood within the broader transition from Fordism to the rise of neoliberalism. Before analysing Austria's housing trajectory, the first part considers how housing production and circulation can be integrated into regulation theory. In addition, land rent theory serves as a key framework, connecting accumulation

processes, real estate dynamics, and housing policy. Using this lens, the historical development of housing in Vienna and Austria is briefly reviewed. The primary focus established in this context is the dynamic situation in the rental housing market, which manifests the financialization process as current struggles over rent structures.

By contrast, the post-Keynesian perspective draws attention to the financialization processes arising from access to housing finance. This has led to higher homeownership rates but simultaneously to greater household debt and systemic instability, while house prices continue to rise.

# 2 Rent theory, regulation and financialization with household indebtedness

Land prices — and therefore land rent — play a key role in the allocation of space for both productive and reproductive functions such as housing. In classical political economy, land — like labour — is treated as a special commodity, not produced within the capitalist process by individual firms. As such, its price is determined differently. Land rent also depends on demand and is not solely attributable to scarcity but also to the social power of landowners, who can withhold land from productive use (Jäger 2020). Land rent can thus be understood less as a calculable category and more as an expression of historically shaped and socially variable power dynamics.

Whereas in the 1970s debate land rent was typically seen as a deduction from profit rather than a form of exploitation, contemporary struggles over rent levels and their regulation may be interpreted as influencing real wages, and, consequently, housing affordability. Broadly defined, housing and land policies constitute and modify the operation of land rent, real estate production, and real estate circulation. Given its distributive implications, housing and land policy from a regulationist perspective can be considered part of social policy and, consequently, part of the wage relation. At the same time, land rent and its specific regulation can be regarded as an element of the ecological constraint. Land rent, as a decisive factor and central social relation in the allocation of physical space, is understood as payment to the landowner. From this perspective, land prices represent nothing more than the capitalised sum of all future rent income — that is, fictitious capital (Jäger 2003).

Housing costs — and hence affordability — including the share attributable to rent, can thus be understood as a socially and historically determined category. Higher real wages at the expense of lower land rents are particularly achievable when wage-setting occurs through collective bargaining, such as sectoral agreements. Conversely, lower housing costs can only be translated into reduced wages through such collective mechanisms. Hence, a more concrete view reveals that the specific form of land regulation can significantly impact the accumulation of productive capital. Purchasing power is largely shaped by class position — i.e., one's role in the production process — and by the structure of the wage relation. Distribution patterns therefore determine differences in purchasing power. In this light, social segregation, as understood by political-economic land rent theory, should not be seen as a voluntary or individual phenomenon.

Furthermore, specific regulation of rent can foster fictitious accumulation, and hence, financialization. Processes of financialization linked to rising land and house prices often occur in speculative cycles (Jäger

2003). Rising real estate prices can therefore be understood as a form of asset price inflation, and thus as feeding into a specific financialized regime of accumulation (Becker et al. 2010).

Beyond the impact of land rent developments on house prices, financialization processes can be linked to an increase in household indebtedness driven by changes in national economic policies, especially those aiming to increase homeownership rates and to encourage precautionary behaviour in the face of uncertainties seemingly arising from shifts in the welfare system (Springler/Wöhl 2023). From a post-Keynesian perspective, the analytical focus on the housing market was mainly shaped by the theoretical work of Hyman Minsky (1992, 2008) and Charles Kindleberger (2000), who drew attention to the international contagion effects building on Minsky's instability hypothesis. For both, the financial fragility of modern capitalistic structures, driven by credit money, lies at the centre of the analysis.

Boom phases and periods of low interest rates generate price surges and increases in speculative demand, accompanied by higher levels of indebtedness (depending on the situation for households and/or corporations). A strong and direct institutional regulatory framework is therefore required to curb the speculative spiral. In the housing market in particular, rising property prices and expanded, easily accessible financial instruments like mortgage loans or alternative financial products can trigger to a housing bubble, as became evident in the financial crisis of 2007-2009 (see e.g. Springler/Wöhl 2019).

# 3 Continuity and change in Vienna's housing policy

Many institutions that, in modified form, still exist today have a long history and continue to shape the Viennese housing system. Hence, to understand the current housing system, it is necessary to trace its historical development. Moreover, since institutions affecting housing affordability and financialization processes are not exclusively regulated at the local level, struggles and regulations at the national (and even supranational) levels must also be considered (Jäger 2002). However, in this short chapter we refrain from a detailed analysis of these processes and their interlinkages across scales, referring to them only in general terms.

# 3.1 From a liberal model to the repression of landlords and finance

Until the late nineteenth century, housing in Vienna was largely unregulated and treated as a regular market good. Severe housing shortages and high costs were widespread. Yet many of the housing regulations now associated with the Fordist period actually began earlier, well before the end of the Second World War. As early as 1910, social unrest and housing shortages led to the introduction of a building tax that charged higher rates for more expensive flats. The revenue funded new housing through a welfare fund (Eigner et al., n.d.: 8f).

After the First World War, housing became significantly less market driven. Measures such as rent controls and the famous housing projects of "Red Vienna" reflected this shift. The major public housing drive from 1923 was prompted by two key factors: the collapse of private construction and the increasing pressure from the settler movement. Instead of supporting self-built homes as the movement had demanded, the city opted to construct large, publicly owned housing complexes (Novy 1993).

Rent regulations made most rental housing highly affordable. The influence of landlords and the finance sector had declined after the war. Rent controls and publicly funded housing — financed through a housing tax — sharply reduced rental costs, cutting landlords' profits and weakening their influence. Housing policy significantly contributed to improved accessibility. However, without strong collective wage bargaining in place, lower rents did not necessarily translate into higher real wages; rather, they enabled employers to offer lower wages in an oversupplied labour market. Only after the Second World Ward did Fordist-style housing policy begin to support broader domestic economic growth. Rising real wages through collective agreements, alongside cheap housing and low land rents, stimulated demand for goods and services. Rent controls and limits on land prices in subsidised housing helped to keep land rents low and to sustain the productivist, inward-oriented growth model. In this period, land policies and supply-side subsidies expanded the housing stock, while demand-side subsidies remained rare. The latter tend to raise prices by boosting purchasing power without generating new housing, benefiting landlords more than tenants and merely redistributing existing units (Jäger 2002).

# 3.2 Recommodification, financialization and its contestation

With the initial relaxation of rent controls in 1968 and subsequent deregulation in the early and mid-1980s, a process of recommodification of housing began. Rents started to rise well above inflation (Jäger 2002, Litschauer/Friesenecker 2021). This was accompanied by a partial erosion of what had once been a cornerstone of the Viennese housing model, as well as of traditional forms of governance. However, the proclaimed end of Red Vienna (Novy et al. 2001) has not yet fully materialised. Central elements of Fordist decommodified institutions, which assure the provision of affordable housing and limit financialization, remain in place today.

The introduction of the *Richtwertmiete* (reference rent or guideline rent) in the mid-1990s enabled the application of surcharges based on socio-spatial location, allowing for price differentiation according to geographical context. This reopened the door to rising rents and residential segregation, driven by land rent and market dynamics. When the productive sector was also affected by deregulation — for example, through higher rents for shop space — it became evident that it had previously benefited from Fordist regulation. This resulted in a redistribution from productive capital to landlords, reflected in a marked increase in income from letting and leasing compared with other sources (Jäger 2002).

Recommodification extended beyond housing stock policy to housing construction policy. Since the mid-1990s, expenditure on housing subsidies relative to GDP has declined significantly (Amann/Oberhuber 2005). The persistence of these regulations at the national level can largely be attributed to a powerful Austrian coalition of banks, construction firms, and (cooperative) developers, who have traditionally (Matznetter 1991) and continue to maintain a vested interest in the Fordist housing subsidy model. For banks, this ensures secure lending, while for construction firms it provides steady contracts.

Nevertheless, recommodification has taken place amid shifting constellations of interest. As the housing stock became recommodified and new dwellings were built for an upper middle class benefiting from increasing income polarisation, fresh business opportunities emerged. Banks are now less reliant on traditional housing

subsidies, seeking investment potential in privately financed property markets instead. Real estate is increasingly regarded as a financial investment, whether in the form of private buy-to-let apartments or as assets in real estate fund portfolios. This shift reflects a transition towards more financialised accumulation patterns. A weakening of traditional housing policy instruments would further bolster these new sectors and increase rental incomes (cf. Nowotny 2006). Reduced subsidies for housing construction would mean fewer new homes, exacerbating housing shortages and pushing up rents on existing properties. Landlords — including finance capital invested in housing — would stand to gain even more. Nonetheless, countervailing forces — particularly non-profit housing developers — remain relatively robust despite evolving accumulation strategies and structural shifts.

# 3.3 Current developments and struggles resisting financialization

Although processes of deregulation, commodification and financialization have taken place, Vienna's tenure structure has changed only slightly over the past two decades (see figure 1). The majority of the population still lives in social rental and private rental rent-controlled apartments (Litschauer/Friesenecker 2021: table 4.1, p. 60)

Figure 1: Tenure structure in Vienna, 1991-2018

	1991		2018		%change 1991-2018
	%of main residence	% of rental	%of main residence	% of rental	
Main segments					
Ownership	17.4		19.4		2.0
Rental	73.6		76.3		2.8
Other	9.0		4.2		-4.8
Rental Subsegments					
Social rental	39.4	53.6	43.4	56.8	3.9
Municipal housing	27.5	37.4	22.2	29.0	-5.4
Limited-profit housing	11.9	16.2	21.2	27.8	9.3
Private rental	34.2	46.4	33.0	43.2	-1.2
Rent-controlled	31.2	42.4	22.2	29.1	-9.0
Free market rent	3.0	4.1	10.8	14.1	7.8
Time-limited	4.0	5.4	13.2	17.3	9.2
Unlimited	33.9	45.0	19.8	26.0	-14.2

Source: Litschauer/Friesenecker 2021: Table. 4.1, p. 60

Although rents have generally risen during this period, there are significant differences across tenure structures (see figure 1). Municipal housing remains the most affordable form of housing. Limited-profit housing and private rent-controlled housing also remain considerably more affordable in relative terms. By contrast, rents

in the private free market have increased significantly (Litschauer/Friesenecker 2021: Figure 4.1, p. 62). This trend can be observed across all Austrian provinces, although the extent of the gap between rents in limited-profit housing associations and those in the free market varies. According to data from the IIBW (2023), provinces with overall lower rent levels show smaller gaps between tenure structures than provinces with generally higher rents (see also Springler 2025). This makes limited-profit housing associations all the more important in resisting financialization. In Vienna, the gap between free-market rents and those in limited-profit housing associations widened from approx. 30% to 35% between 2020 and 2022 (Springler 2025: Figure 2).

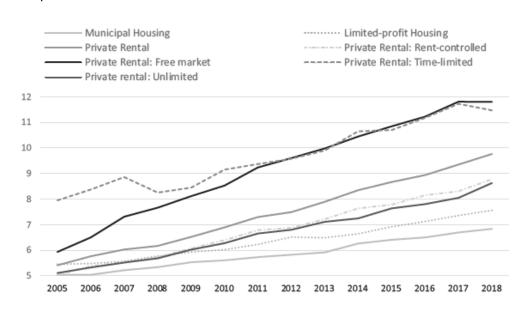


Figure 2: Development of rents in different tenure structures

Source: Litschauer/Friesenecker 2021: Figure 4.1, p. 62

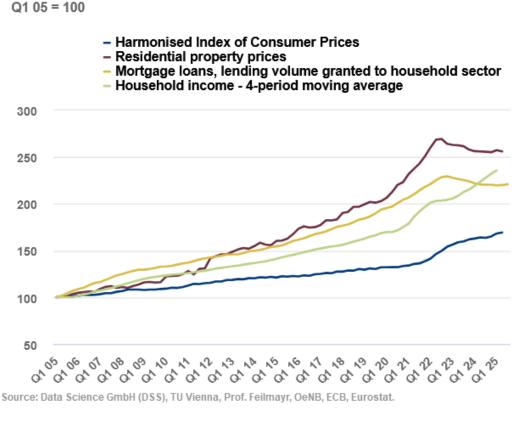
While the private housing sector, and in particular private production, has undergone processes of financialization and experienced substantial house price increases (Springler/Wöhl 2019), this trend is not observed for the large stock of old rent-controlled buildings constructed before the First World War.

According to Musil et al. (2021), although ownership structures have largely changed, traditional bank loans and local companies continue to play a central role in the purchase of these buildings, while financial investors remain largely absent. Hence, existing rent controls appear to act as a barrier to financialization processes. Nevertheless, financialization is evident through rising household indebtedness. Data from the Austrian Central Bank (OeNB, see figure 3) show that residential property prices in Austria increased significantly between 2005 and 2025, rising by more than 250%.

Although property prices rose and mortgage lending expanded during a period of persistently low interest rates, household incomes did not increase correspondingly. As figure 3 shows, developments in property prices and household incomes were roughly comparable until 2012. After that, financial fragility increased, as affordability appeared contingent upon the continued decrease of interest rates to finance rising property prices. These developments in house prices cannot be explained solely by CPI (consumer price index)

increases in this period. To analyze house prices increases beyond those driven by higher housing demand and inflationary pressures, the Austria Central Bank has calculated a fundamental house prices indicator since the mid-2010s (see Schneider 2013). Based on these data, it is evident that, in Vienna, house prices have experienced a price premium symbolizing a speculative mark-up since the beginning of 2012. Overall, house prices across Austria followed a similar trend by 2016 (see OeNB 2025).

Figure 3: Development in property prices, mortgage loans and household income from 2005 to 2025



Source: OeNB (n.Y)

# 4 Conclusion: The future of housing in Vienna

To maintain and enhance affordability in Vienna, it is necessary to continue resisting and reducing the commodification and financialization of housing and land. This can be achieved by strengthening the decommodification of housing through increased public provision. It is essential to ensure that the existing housing stock remains affordable, accessible, and of high quality. Pressures from actors interested in privatization, deregulation, and financialization of the housing stock must be resisted.

Moreover, new housing should be constructed under rent control measures and guided by a non-profit orientation. To support these objectives, land prices must be kept low through appropriate land-use policies, and public land should be reserved for the development of public housing rather than being allocated to private real estate developers.

However, housing policies in Vienna must also be understood within the broader context of the Austrian accumulation model. The Austrian economy continues to have a strong productivist orientation, meaning that pressures to alter institutions that facilitate the fictitious accumulation of capital in the real estate sector, and hence, financialization, remain relatively weak. Social housing production under rent control measures must serve as a genuine alternative to homeownership.

The treatment of housing as an asset has driven rising property prices and expanded mortgage lending. As property prices, particularly in Vienna, have increased substantially, there is a strong need for regulatory focus on the development and control of credit money.

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Fachhochschule des BFI Wien – Hochschule für Wirtschaft, Management und Finance Wohlmutstraße 22, A-1020 Wien

Tel.: +43/1/720 12 86 Fax: +43/1/720 12 86-219 E-Mail: info@fh-vie.ac.at

www.fh-vie.ac.at

