

FLAGSHIP OF RED VIENNA:

Karl Marx-Hof



by Duncan JD Smith

The old wine-making village of Heiligenstadt in the suburbs of Vienna has long been popular with visitors and locals alike. Its winding streets and pitched roofs give the place a rustic feel, especially in autumn when the leaves are turning and the vineyards are busy with grape pickers. Not surprisingly Beethoven came here on the advice of his doctor in the hope that some country living might improve his hearing.

But walk downhill from Heiligenstadt towards the Danube and the urban scene changes dramatically. Emerging like an island in the city

is a very different sort of living space. This is the Karl Marx-Hof. Over one kilometre in length and spanning four tram stops, it holds the distinction of being the longest single residential building in the world.

The origins of this colossal structure can be found in the collapse of the Habsburg Empire at the end of the First World War. Out of this cataclysmic event, the First Republic of Austria was

ABOVE: The Karl Marx-Hof in Vienna is a fine example of politically driven architecture (photo © Marcin Łukaszewicz/dreamstime.com).

born — but the loss of so many former territories inevitably brought severe economic hardships, widespread unemployment and even famine.

Against this troubled backdrop, the vote was extended to all Viennese adults. That widening of the franchise, coupled with the rise of a powerful labour movement inspired by the country's Marxist Workers' Party, led to a landslide electoral victory for the Social Democrats. Vienna thus became one of the world's first cities to be run by a firmly socialist government. In 1922, Vienna was made a separate Austrian federal province, distinct from conservative Lower Austria of which it had formerly been a part.

Despite tensions with the conservatives, who still held sway in the Austrian countryside, the new city council — dubbed 'Rotes Wien' (Red Vienna) — embarked on Europe's most intensive programme of social reform. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the task of rehousing a quarter of a million workers, who at the time occupied crumbling and overcrowded nineteenth-century tenements. These were replaced by some four hundred new municipal tenement complexes (*Gemeindebauten*), which together provided almost sixty thousand new apartments at an affordable rent.

Basic home comforts included running water and WC, together with a hitherto unimaginable public infrastructure. Striking examples are the Reumannhof in Favoriten, Friedrich-Engels-Hof in Brigittenau, Sandleitenhof in Ottakring and

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Rabenhof in Landstrasse. Red Vienna's true architectural flagship though was undoubtedly the Karl Marx-Hof in Döbling.

Constructed between 1927 and 1930 to a design by city planner Karl Ehn, the Karl Marx-Hof stands on land reclaimed from the Danube, once deep enough for shipping. Designed for a population of about five thousand, the complex included 1,382 apartments (each 30–60 m² in size) and communal amenities such as kindergartens, clinics, shops and laundries (one of these, Wash House No. 2 at Halteraugasse 7, today contains a small museum about the building). There was also a youth centre, pharmacy, library and post office. In common with other *Gemeindebauten* the work was financed by a variety of special taxes on, *inter alia*, unearned incomes and luxuries such as champagne.

Not surprisingly the finished building displayed minimal ornamentation and was named after the founding father of socialism. It was also dubbed the *Ringstrasse des Proletariats*, a sarcastic nod to Vienna's imperial boulevard, which had been constructed half a century earlier as a showcase for Habsburg opulence.

Significantly, the building itself occupies less than 20% of the total area of the Karl Marx-Hof, the rest being made up of courtyards, gardens and playgrounds deemed important to the inhabitants' well-being. Even beyond the perimeter lie rows of tiny hedged-in gardens known as *Schrebergärten*. Named after Daniel Gottlieb Schreber, the nineteenth-century German founder of the Small Garden Movement, they were originally also designated as play areas but in reality served as vegetable allotments during times of shortage. These days many have become the apartment dweller's very own pleasure garden in miniature, replete with summerhouse, pond and tiny orchard.

Tragically, by the early thirties Vienna's socialist experiment was faltering in the face of rising National Socialism, global economic crises, mounting unemployment and worsening relations within federal Austria. Red Vienna had become increasingly politically distinct from the

ONLY IN VIENNA

This article on the Karl Marx-Hof is adapted from the latest edition of Duncan JD Smith's book *Only in Vienna: A Guide to Unique Locations, Hidden Corners and Unusual Objects* published by The Urban Explorer. Existing titles in the "Only In" series, all written by Duncan, cover Berlin, Budapest, Cologne, Hamburg, London, Munich, Paris, Prague and Zurich. The next title in the series, *Only in Edinburgh*, will be published later this year. You can find out more about the guidebook series and Duncan's work at www.onlyinguides.com and www.duncanjdsmith.com.

rest of conservative Austria and tensions climaxed in a brief three-day civil war in February 1934. Two thousand members of the socialist workers' militia (*Schutzbund*) died during fighting with superior conservative forces (*Heimwehr*), the Karl Marx-Hof doubling as a fortress before being bombed into submission. Despite the best efforts of Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss to contain the situation, Austria had begun its inexorable slide into the hands of Hitler's Germany.

Not until after the war could the flame of Red Vienna be reignited. The Social Democrats have won every election in Vienna ever since and these days the *Gemeindebauten* are inhabited by a wide range of people — no longer just the poor workers of old — who rent apartments from the municipality. About 600,000 people (approximately one third of the city's population) live this way, with thousands more on the waiting list.

But therein lies a problem. City planners forecast Vienna's population will grow substantially over the next decade and the housing stock isn't keeping pace. This is creating a widening gap between rising rents and stagnating salaries. To ease the pressure, the Social Democrats are re-viving Red Vienna's social housing programme by upgrading existing *Gemeindebauten* and building new ones. Whether they can do this without increasing tenants' rents against a backdrop of rising food prices will undoubtedly be a factor in how the Viennese vote when next they go to the ballot box. ■

source: *hidden europe* 48 (spring 2016)
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