



Between the democratization of housing and the neoliberal responsabilization of citizens: The proliferation of co-housing in Viennese city planning

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Abstract

In contemporary city planning, self-organized collaborative forms of housing are flourishing. However, in the literature, the increasing incorporation of citizens in housing and planning has been interpreted in very different ways. The research on urban planning has understood the proliferation of co-housing groups as indicating changing participatory demands of citizens on one hand, and as an effort to organize social change on an everyday level on the other. In contrast, critical social researchers have interpreted the rise of collaborative housing not as a democratization, but as a shift of urban governance towards the responsabilization of citizens. In this article, we use these two theoretical

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perspectives for making sense of the political values that are present in the contemporary proliferation of co-housing groups in Viennese urban planning. The empirical base of our endeavor is a series of qualitative interviews with different stakeholders (city planners, administrators, architects, developers, and neighbors) and members of co-housing groups in the city development area Wildgarten in the South of the city. We conclude that in the Wildgarten, the self-empowerment of citizens goes hand-in-hand with an increasing top-down steering by a neoliberal entrepreneurial city. Furthermore, we found that the co-housing groups tend to willingly accept the hierarchy between planning bodies and themselves, which contradicts the political marketing strategies of social transformation and democratization attached to Wildgarten. Simultaneously, possibly as a consequence from top-down citizen responsabilization, our findings show that co-housing groups often focus more on a democratized group interior than on transforming society at large.

Keywords

Co-housing, collaborative housing, democratization, participation, urban planning

Introduction

Following a general trend in public policy (Saurugger, 2010), it has been highlighted that in the various forms of environmental governance (Bäckstrand et al., 2010; Blühdorn and Deflorian, 2019; Newig, 2007), sustainability transformation (Kersting, 2021), and modern city planning (Rosol, 2015; Stapper and Duyvendak, 2020), the idea of citizens participating in decision-making has become hegemonic. This development in Western planning culture, inter alia, goes back to the New Social Movements of the 1970s and 1980s and their demands to democratize society. Part of this development is that more autonomous forms of housing and citizen-led projects of collaborative co-housing, such as self-organized *Baugruppen*,¹ are increasingly incorporated in urban development projects (Czischke et al., 2020; Lang and Stoeger, 2018).

This trend has been interpreted in different ways. On one hand, it has been argued that the proliferation of more self-organized forms of housing might be understood as a reaction to rising participatory and democratic demands of citizens. City administrations incorporate the forms of co-housing into many urban development projects to answer citizen demands and to cater to social groups which are able and willing to invest the required time, skill, and resources. Viewed through this lens, the proliferation of citizens self-organizing their housing signals that demands for democratic participation, self-organization, and autonomy have increased and that they have put pressure on administrations and governments to facilitate democratization and inclusion

(Butzlaff and Deflorian, 2021; Tummers, 2016). In this perspective, the proliferation of co-housing indicates that societies are changing *bottom-up*.

On the other hand, scholars have pointed to a growing importance of market principles for public administration, a state-led gentrification, and an urban entrepreneurialism remolding the meaning of “the public”, which have led to a responsabilization of citizens for roles and spaces previously considered public tasks (Rosol, 2015; Stapper and Duyvendak, 2020). In this perspective, which has previously been debated in this journal (Kadi et al., 2021), city administrations offer spaces for self-organized forms of housing not with a democratization of society in mind, but to secure a competitiveness of urban development (by attracting more resourceful and creative entrepreneurial citizens) and to secure a democratically concealed political management (Peters and Pierre, 2010). Viewed through this lens, the proliferation of co-housing and *Baugruppen* in urban development projects marks an increasing responsabilization of citizens and a retooling of participatory governance. Taking market principles and urban entrepreneurialism as a point of entry, facilitating self-organization and autonomous housing among citizens appropriates the notion of citizen participation for a *top-down* control and a profit- and marketing-oriented politics of the city.

The aim of this article is to scrutinize the varying political motives behind involving *co-housing projects* in an urban development process in Vienna, Austria. Previous research on co-housing has so far “not sufficiently consider(ed) the political values” (Griffith et al., 2022: 2) of co-housing projects and

the administrations' motivations for facilitating opportunities for collaborative housing projects. As a rare exception to this, Scheller and Thörn (2018) have provided an analysis of how conflicting political ideas are present among various stakeholders in the process of integrating co-housing groups into urban development in Sweden and Germany. To further address this research gap, we turn to *Wildgarten*, an urban development project south of the Vienna city center. This development area provides a fruitful case as it includes four different *Baugruppen* besides other forms of privately owned and municipal housing. While these present themselves as participatory communities that offer ways of collective self-organization, the public marketing for the development area portrays them as housing innovators that play a vital role in establishing a thriving future neighborhood. We rely on qualitative in-depth interviews with planners, representatives of the city administration, architects, developers, neighbors, and with members of the four *Baugruppen* during the early construction phase of *Wildgarten*, while the co-housing groups were in different stages of development. We make use of the theoretical perspectives mentioned above, by asking (1) to what extent can the integration of co-housing into Viennese urban development be considered as a response of city planners to rising democratic demands? and (2) to what extent can it be seen as a co-optation of creative citizens by city planners and developers to boost project portfolios and conceal top-down arrangements of urban governance?

We will proceed as follows: First, we revisit different strands of literature in democratic theory, participation research, and urban studies to reconstruct two different readings of contemporary co-housing. In Section "Methods and the case of the Viennese *Wildgarten*," we describe our methodology and the case of *Wildgarten*. In Section "Co-Housing in Vienna as democratization and participation" and "Co-housing in Vienna as a neoliberal form of governance," we apply the two theoretical perspectives and turn to the different motivations of planners, administrators, developers, on one hand, and members of the *Baugruppen*, on the other. We reveal how co-housing members experience and deal with bottom-up and top-down motivations for involving

citizens in urban development, and which tensions arise along the way. Section "Conclusion" concludes by implying that facilitating space for the self-organization of housing and increasing citizens' participation in city planning can lead to paradoxical results, such as a certain empowerment of (some) citizens, but also a democratically concealed control of citizens to improve the built stock of the entrepreneurial city. With this article, we contribute to the research on changing urban politics and the role (democratic) participation is expected to play within.

Two perspectives on the recent proliferation of contemporary co-housing

Self-organized forms of housing have a long tradition in Europe. This goes back to the first half of the 19th century and the early socialists' experiments with Utopian visions of the everyday (Tummers, 2016). More than a hundred years later, the New Social Movements of the 1970s and 1980s experimented with collaborative forms of living, which should contribute to self-determination, relationships of solidarity, and ecological sustainability. In the contemporary, the literature on urban planning and development diagnoses a revived interest in collaborative forms of housing, reading it as a sign for increasing social demands with regard to planning and housing and as efforts to realize social change on an everyday level (Czischke et al., 2020; Lang et al., 2020; Stoisser and Van Gent, 2024; Tummers, 2016). However, in contrast to earlier, more ideologically motivated experiments prefiguring alternative visions of society, contemporary forms are described as being more pragmatic in addressing the social, economic, and ecological problems and crises of today (Tummers, 2016). Present day co-housing has been characterized as "anti-Utopian" in that it does not seem to confront mainstream liberal values, but rather embraces them (Scheller and Thörn, 2018).

On a conceptual level, self-organized forms of housing have been described in manifold ways suggesting various terminologies characterized by fuzzy boundaries (Beck, 2020; Griffith et al., 2022). Projects differ in how collective ownership, self-management, and architecture are organized and

the values on which they are based on (Griffith et al., 2022). Czischke et al. (2020) have proposed the umbrella term “collaborative housing” for all forms of housing which rely on a certain degree of “collaboration among residents as well as between a community of residents and external stakeholders” (Czischke et al., 2020: 1). However, as Tummers (2016) and Vestbro (2010) argue, the term “collaborative housing” might exclude less tightly knitted initiatives coined “collective” or “communal” housing. Instead, they propose using “co-housing” and reading the “co” as collaborative, collective, and communal, therefore including a great variety of groups that share common space and facilities, and a certain degree of self-reliance. For this article, we use this wide umbrella term “co-housing” to include different experiences of shared space and self-organization.

Co-housing groups such as *Baugruppen* often pursue more sustainable ways of living through an intense participation of their members. They are frequently interpreted and conceptualized as agents and pioneers of change that co-create socioecological transformation and an elevated efficiency of resource use. These ascriptions are not purely academic but have been used by both the academic literature and co-housing activists themselves (Czischke et al., 2020; Tummers, 2016). The revived interest in co-housing, the argument goes, is fueled by increasing participatory demands of citizens as much as by a perceived urgency for a socioecological transformation of society and a will to leave behind traditional structures, such as family, gender roles, unsustainable lifestyles, and social isolation (Lang et al., 2020; Vestbro and Horelli, 2012). In this perspective, citizens who establish or join co-housing groups seek socially and ecologically alternative forms of housing and strive to overcome social isolation and alienation in the (urban) world of today. Read this way, the current proliferation of and the scholarly interest for alternative forms of housing both match the diagnoses of increasing demands for democratic participation and citizen involvement (Blühdorn and Butzlaff, 2020; Butzlaff, 2016).

These findings link the research on co-housing to Inglehart’s (1977) observation of a “silent revolution” and a value change that renders modern societies ever

more liberal and democratic. A growing orientation toward self-determination, self-expression, and “effective democracy” (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005), with modern citizens becoming increasingly articulate, participation-oriented, and politically self-confident, would favor and support democratic institutions (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). Furthermore, rising participatory expectations have led to increasing engagement outside of established institutions such as political parties, creating new opportunities for democratic participation in spaces previously considered apolitical, such as housing (Theocharis and Van Deth, 2016). This expansion of participatory expectations, already coined a “participatory explosion” in the 1960s (Almond and Verba, 1963), continues to reshuffle what is considered participatory and democratic (Blühdorn and Butzlaff, 2020). Growing expectations for more direct experiences of participation, decision-making, and co-creation mobilize movements, such as DIO/DIY-(do it ourselves/yourselfes)-initiatives (Pickard, 2019) or the increasing trend of community initiatives and community-led agriculture (Butzlaff and Deflorian, 2021; Deflorian, 2023; Rosol, 2010). Therefore, seen through the lens of the research on democratic participation, the current rise of co-housing groups might well indicate rising demands for participation and engagement, which are then being picked up by perceptive city planners.

However, the proliferation of co-housing has also been characterized not as a democratization but as an expansion of neoliberal governance and entrepreneurial approaches in city planning (Kadi et al., 2021; Peters and Pierre, 2010; Stapper and Duyvendak, 2020). In this view, city planners and administrations have taken advantage of the motivations and organizational capacities of co-housing activists and citizens’ (growing) expectations to be consulted more readily on matters of the common good. As citizen participation in planning has become the new norm (Kersting, 2021), the provision of spaces for citizen self-organization has become a primary concern for city administration and planners alike (Kamleithner, 2009; Peters and Pierre, 2010). Often, these new forms of citizen inclusion in city development contain instruments that redirect previously public responsibilities toward private involvement by framing them as

bottom-up spaces for individual agents—be it in the field of housing, health, nutrition, transport, mobility, or others. (Rosol, 2015). The contemporary decline of the European welfare state also signals the transformation from Keynesian to neoliberal forms of public policy. This might have become especially relevant since the financial crisis of 2008: The privatization of pensions and retirement provisions, and the consecutive austerity crisis with its respective effects on welfare state downsizing have made co-housing all the more attractive to those seeking social relations to reduce social isolation and vulnerability (Choi, 2004; Keil, 2009; Mayer, 2013; Uitermark and Nicholls, 2014). Consequently, some situate contemporary co-housing in a context of advanced liberal urban governance, which is characterized by a “liberal re-engineering of the welfare state city” (Scheller and Thörn, 2018: 916).

In addition, the decision about when and where spaces are opened up for citizen initiatives as supposedly bottom-up experiments is mostly anticipated and planned top-down (Stapper and Duyvendak, 2020; Stoisser and Van Gent, 2024). This is not to say that urban development has turned towards more authoritarian decision-making. In the governance literature, it is widely assumed that participatory forms of governance operate more effectively and efficiently than traditional government approaches, not only in terms of environmental and social sustainability (Kersting, 2021; Peters and Pierre, 2010) but also with regard to political responsiveness (Blühdorn and Deflorian, 2019; Newig, 2007). In Western cities, in particular, the organization of stakeholder processes for involving local residents has become a hallmark of contemporary good governance (Stapper and Duyvendak, 2020). Following this trend, city planning and urban development have also started to provide more spaces for co-housing initiatives (Tummers, 2016), creating “hybrid forms of bottom-up and top-down approaches” (Beck, 2020: 60). Tummers (2016) emphasizes that co-housing in the contemporary has changed since the days of the 1970s New Social Movements and has become much less contentious and more orchestrated from above compared to the autonomous bottom-up initiatives that had dominated in the past (see also Stoisser and Van Gent, 2024).

However, as many have argued, these developments have delivered mixed results in terms of their democratization effects (Kadi et al., 2021; Peters and Pierre, 2010; Rosol, 2015; Stapper and Duyvendak, 2020). As participatory processes in urban development are often tailored to the interests of resourceful and better-off, self-articulated, and self-confident citizens (“entrepreneurial citizens”) and as the processes are tailored to the interests of a city administration motivated by market philosophy, they might amplify existing social inequalities and not provide the citizen empowerment they claim to promote. Instead, they offer democratically concealed opportunities to “neutralize objections” (Stapper and Duyvendak, 2020) and exercise new and innovative forms of citizen management (Rosol, 2015).

Both perspectives connect to different sets of political values and lead to different interpretations and hypotheses regarding the mobilization of co-housing: whereas co-housing as democratization connects to values of socioecological transformation and an ongoing self-determination of citizens, and a certain post-materialism, self-expression, and decentralization as developed *inter alia* by Inglehart’s diagnosis of a silent revolution, co-housing understood as neoliberal governance connects to values of efficiency, a reduction of public responsibility and welfare states, a privatization of housing, and an entrepreneurial understanding of urban development. As alternative lenses, both lead to competing hypotheses: (a) a rise in co-housing indicates that citizens’ democratic expectations are increasing and are driven by the motivation to bottom-up transform society beginning with their own housing (Tummers, 2016); (b) a rise in co-housing indicates that housing is increasingly incorporated into a top-down neoliberal urban planning and governance approach and responsabilizes resourceful citizens for tasks previously considered public duties, such as neighborhood integration, provision of affordable housing, and services, such as cultural activities.

By empirically scrutinizing both hypotheses through the motivations and values of planners, developers, administrators, and co-housing groups in Vienna, we seek to shed light on the socio-political condition of the current proliferation of co-housing.

Methods and the case of the Viennese *Wildgarten*

For that purpose, we have chosen *Wildgarten*, a development area in the south-west of Vienna, as a suitable and promising case. The building grounds of *Wildgarten* belong to the state-owned but profit-oriented *Austrian Real Estate GmbH (ARE)* and accommodate 21 different housing projects with a prospected 2.300 inhabitants. The *Wildgarten* subscribes to various goals of sustainability.² Addressing ecological sustainability, the development area, once completed, will offer car-sharing, additional public transport, organically grown green spaces, conservation sites for wild animals, a forest garden, renewable energy and heating services, and a car-free neighborhood. Addressing social sustainability, the *Wildgarten* will provide space for a nature kindergarten, a neighborhood center, apartments for refugees, and co-working spaces. In 2020, when the research was conducted, *Wildgarten* was partly under construction and partly inhabited, allowing for an observation at a time when the designing and organizing of the area was still ongoing, yet results of the planning processes were already visible, so that reflection processes within the co-housing groups about their projects were happening.

Co-housing in Vienna dates back to the Viennese settlement movement which was originally formed as collective self-help in response to the housing and food crisis after the First World War. Organized as cooperatives and later also supported by the municipal administration, the settlers' movement produced both architectural and housing-cultural innovations in collective ownership (Novy and Förster, 1991). From the mid-1920s, however, self-organized cooperative housing was gradually superseded by the construction of municipal housing estates (Haderer, 2023; Novy et al., 2001). Elements of co-housing and communal facilities were thereby taken up and mainstreamed by public housing (Novy and Förster, 1991). After the Second World War, professional cooperative and limited-profit housing organizations were increasingly promoted as an instrument for social housing provision leading to a transformed governance culture within the third sector where "hierarchical decision-making and administrative

authority replaced collective self-help" (Lang and Novy, 2014: 1749). The upswing in co-housing activity in the early 2000s, which again sparked renewed political interest, may be seen as a response to the increasing professionalization and bureaucratization of cooperative housing (Lang and Stoeger, 2018). With the inclusion of social sustainability as the fourth pillar in developer competitions for land and public funding, participatory and community principles were reintroduced into social housing policy alongside economic, ecological, and architectural objectives (Wohnfonds_Wien, 2019). Since then, the city administration has actively allocated building plots in new development areas to co-housing groups, promoting them as an instrument for sustainable development.

For fulfilling goals of social sustainability,³ the *Wildgarten* planning group organized participatory processes from the early start and aimed to integrate sustainability and participation objectives. In total, 4 of the 21 building plots were allocated to co-housing groups through a competitive procedure. In other words, through a top-down process, ARE and the city administration encouraged and partly funded four co-housing groups, which are often associated with bottom-up organization and planning. This simultaneous existence of both top-down and bottom-up motivations promises a fruitful case to analyze, not least because Vienna has been described as being historically governed in a paternalistic fashion (Novy et al., 2001).

Our assessment of the four Baugruppen supports Griffith et al.'s (2022) observation that co-housing initiatives greatly differ in how they re-interpret the organizational and ideational heritage of co-housing. Whereas the groups *Rose Garden*, *WILLDAwohnen*, and *Que(e)rbeet* remain comparatively close to the 1970s and 1980s ideas of autonomy and self-organization and involve their members in collective decision-making, *Mi(e)gestalten* represents a new and reduced idea of co-housing. The latter group has outsourced much of the deliberation and (self-)organization, and is planned and guided by an urban development agency. This is to explicitly address people who want to live in a community but do not want to be part of a traditional co-housing project. The urban development agency organized meetings

of the inhabitants already during the planning phase, allowing them to participate in the design of individual apartments and community spaces. However, in contrast to other co-housing groups, the entire financing, risk management, and construction organization were handled by the urban development agency. On completion, the apartments are rented out to the inhabitants by a non-profit developer. This approach, a managed form of self-organization and steered autonomy, claims a more democratic experience of co-housing in that membership and participation are supposedly less strenuous and demand less resources, such as time, social capital, money, networks, and self-confidence. These resources are crucial for the other projects as the degree of self-organization is considerably higher.

For instance, *Que(e)rbeet* was initiated by two individuals, who had previously already developed a similar project in a different part of Vienna. They decided to bring about this second project together with the cooperative EBG and a small number of prospective residents. The initiators do not live in the co-housing project but managed the community until the move-in date. The idea for *Rosegarden* was developed in 2016 by a small group and submitted to the developer competition. For the second round of the competition, the group expanded and adapted the project proposal to the larger group's needs. Who joins this housing project is decided collectively. *Mi(e)tgestalten*, *Que(e)rbeet*, and *Rosegarden* are subsidized by the city of Vienna and inhabitants thus need to adhere to certain income limits. However, as another condition for public subsidies, up to a third of apartments are allocated through the Viennese Housing System, without the co-housing groups having much influence about the people moving in—which might provide a liability for the collaborative self-organizing. *WILLDAwohnen*, instead, waived the housing subsidy from the city of Vienna because it did not want to be bound by the upper limit of construction costs set by this subsidy. Therefore, the housing costs in *WILLDAwohnen* are relatively high. *WILLDAwohnen* was initiated by an architecture and organizational development office. For the developer competition, a group of future residents formed on the initiative of these offices. They developed the concept of the *WILLDAwohnen* which focused on social sustainability and openness

to the neighborhood (i.e. operating a co-working space, a food cooperative, and a guest apartment). The purchase of the land and the construction were financed by a non-profit developer. After the completion of the house and the consolidation of the residents' group, the group bought the land and the house. The group is organized as an association, and the association—not the residents as individuals—owns the house and the single apartments to prevent speculation with housing.

With the four co-housing groups as the central component for this research, their diversity elevates the *Wildgarten* above a single case study. Methodologically, we conducted 12 qualitative in-depth interviews with three groups of interviewees:

- (a) Five interviews with, in total, six representatives of co-housing groups: **active members of all four co-housing groups** within the *Wildgarten* and a member of a co-housing group that applied for but was *not* awarded a building plot within the *Wildgarten*. These interviews aimed to acquire insights into the values and motivations of co-housing participants and their perceptions of the *Wildgarten* and its citizens' involvement.
- (b) Four interviews with, in total, five **stakeholders who were involved in the development of the *Wildgarten***. These include the neighborhood management, the city administration, local politicians, the project developers, and neighbors to the *Wildgarten* area. This second group of interviews aimed to shed light on the motivations and strategies of city planners and developers to include co-housing and the city administration's hopes and expectations towards citizen participation and their understanding of citizens' preferences regarding political involvement.
- (c) Two interviews were conducted with **experts**, an architect, and a consultant on co-housing in Austria, to situate the *Wildgarten* case in the broader context of city planning in Vienna.

Interview questions ranged from how interviewees perceived the roles of co-housing in the neighborhood, the expectations directed towards them,

how they experienced the coordination and participation process between city authorities, urban planners, and local citizens, and the motivations to participate in a co-housing group. Each interview was conducted by two members of the research team with one or two interviewees. The interviews were interpreted by the research team through an iterative and collective process. The theoretical conception of the two perspectives (Section “Two perspectives on the recent proliferation of contemporary co-housing”), together with initial insights from the interview data led to a development of a derivative and emergent code structure, which was then applied to the interview transcripts using MAXQDA. Next, insights from these codes were discussed collectively, extracting the most salient themes that illuminate the political values behind the current proliferation of co-housing. The questionnaire and a detailed overview of the interviewees can be found in the supplemental material to this article. In the following, we will discuss our results using the two theoretical perspectives: co-housing as a democratization (Section “Co-Housing in Vienna as democratization and participation”) and as a neoliberal form of governance (Section “Co-housing in Vienna as a neoliberal form of governance”).

Co-housing in Vienna as democratization and participation

We begin by zooming in on the different notions of participation among participants in co-housing initiatives and stakeholders and experts, and the effects of these different understandings in urban development. Furthermore, we investigate different stakeholders’ understanding of whether participation in *Wildgarten* is aimed at broader goal of socioeconomic transformation.

First, most co-housing groups understand (democratic) participation primarily as an internal mechanism of coordination and an instrument to establish a more cooperative and socially integrative way of housing and living. In their view, participation is a tool to take responsibility and to co-construct their personal housing environment in a direct manner. To participate without much steering or intervention

from the outside and to jointly shape the community’s housing bottom-up are the main interest of three out of the four co-housing groups: *Rose Garden*, *WILLDAwohnen*, and *Que(e)rbeet*. Notably, however, members of *Mi(e)tgestalten* differ, as their co-housing is based on top-down arranged co-determination right from the start:

There is often the spirit of “we do everything alone and by ourselves.” I would recommend every co-housing group to have somebody at their side who accompanies them neutrally, but hardly any group affords this. (I10_Sabine)

In general, the notions of participation within co-housing groups are not going far beyond the boundaries of their respective initiative. It is not understood as a mechanism for large-scale political decision-making, to shape the greater society or to organize a socioecological transformation in a wider sense.

In contrast, stakeholders who have been involved in developing *Wildgarten* but also experts demonstrate a very different understanding of participation. They perceive and voice a growing demand of citizens to be engaged in decision-making on a much larger scale. Here, a stark difference can be noticed between the residents’ notions and those that were ascribed to them. Experts and planners assume an intrinsic citizen motivation for being pioneers and a desire to be active and shape a socioecological transformation. However, as showcased above, the co-housing groups signal a much more restricted and private in-group understanding of participation. Whereas the co-housing initiatives wish to concentrate on their direct and immediate living/housing environment, they are often expected to take part in the organization of a profound change of the social and ecological environment of the area and the city at large:

Co-housing groups certainly are a driving force for sustainability and for innovation [. . .]. They are a progressive force in the *Wildgarten*. It is known that in urban development they are factors of innovation and actors of social and ecological sustainability, as they tend to be people who are engaged and want to achieve something great in their district and you can sense that in the *Wildgarten*. Their aspirations are higher than those of other residents. (I4_Elisabeth)

Between *Rosegarden*, *WILLDAwohnen*, and *Que(e)rbeet*, on one hand, and *Mi(e)tgestalten*, on the other hand, perspectives on socioecological transformation are comparatively much less present with the latter. Yet, and this is what elevates our study above a selection of single cases, also in the cases of the three more traditional co-housing groups, which could have led to expect a more transformation-centered motivation, contributing to a different society was not the key driver for people to join. In most cases of our interviews, participation and transformation expectations are directed at the *inside* of the groups and at the concrete and private setting of housing, neighborhood, and daily life. Furthermore, an increase in forms of managed co-housing indicates that many citizens seek a form of *co-shaping* (*Mitgestalten*), not a *co-decision* (*Mitentscheiden*).

Our interviewees revealed that participating in and taking responsibility for the co-determination of housing can be resource-intensive, energy-sapping, and at times frustrating. Many interviewees from co-housing groups, especially those that seek to self-manage most of the process, report being tired and burned out from the relentless processes of coordination and opinion-forming within their groups. There are varying degrees of “Co-housing burnout [Baugruppenburnout]” (I10_Sabine) as different groups expect different levels of participation and self-organization.

Rose Garden, *WILLDAwohnen*, and *Que(e)rbeet* intend to self-organize as much as possible, coordinate the construction and planning with architects, and to arrange for a bottom-up opinion-forming and decision-making of the group. Here, interviewees report processes of fatigue and frustration that mutually reinforce each other. Even though it is only about a relatively small plot of land: the project of co-determination brings people close to the limits of what they can do and invest, as within many co-housing groups, there is an indirect imperative to be always active and involved. This is also found in the expectation that it is *through* participation itself that the group is being formed. To self-organize without interference or guidance (because they also do not trust interference from the outside) remains the ideal.

In contrast, *Mi(e)tgestalten* specifically addresses the problems of overburdening by designing a form of *managed self-organization* where the organization of participation is outsourced and limited to rather non-controversial issues and questions. Such managed and steered ways of self-organization, in which participation means deciding on small, pre-defined questions, might present easily accessible and low threshold forms of direct and supposedly more democratic forms of participation (see also Graefe, 2019). People feel involved without having to organize too much themselves. In the interviews, this is described as a lower threshold and a true “democratization” of co-housing as it would allow more people from diverse social backgrounds to take part in the self-management of housing, once reserved to people with more participatory resources. As one interviewee who co-manages *Mi(e)tgestalten* puts it: “[Co-housing] is a bit of an elite program.” (I10_Sabine)

In addition, we observed that the co-housing members are motivated by a special form of community, which they reportedly had not experienced in previous forms of housing before. Through the lens of democratic participation, this might indeed appear as a growing demand for involvement, yet one that it is not about co-determining greater goals of societal transformation, but a co-creation of the private living environment. To feel supported and disencumbered by a housing community was one of the key motivations for joining a co-housing initiative. However, the demand to be involved in the coordination of this housing environment is varying greatly between different co-housing groups. Furthermore, as interviewees report, the aspect of wear-out and fatigue underlines an ambivalence. Participation is, thus, a promise and a burden to them.

To sum it up: First, yes, we noted increasing and changing demands for participation and involvement. However, they are primarily directed at the in-group community of the close and known and not at the transformation of the society at large or a more general form of political participation and co-determination. Second, these demands for participation appear to thrive differently in different social groups. Co-housing groups that emphasize autonomous and

bottom-up organized co-determination tend to remain more socially exclusive and restricted to those with the respective participatory resources (such as time, education, knowledge, energy, finance, and social self-confidence). Groups such as *Mi(e) tgestalten*, which offer a lower threshold in a form of top-down organized autonomy and a form of managed self-organization, might be more accessible. Yet, at a cost of a much less bottom-up oriented form of participation. Third, despite public marketing promises, the expectation that co-housing groups might be easily connected to a sustainability transformation could not be read from the interviews. In the reported motivations of participants, it did not play a key role.

Co-housing in Vienna as a neoliberal form of governance

From the second analytical perspective, which interprets increasing opportunities for co-housing as a neoliberal governance technique, the motivations behind the contemporary increase in co-housing would appear different. Here, we zoom in on the way participation and engagement are set and used in the *Wildgarten*, and on the respective rationales of the City of Vienna, the ARE, and others to include co-housing initiatives in the decision-making. We focus on whether citizens are responsabilized, and how participation is framed with the city administration and the *Wildgarten* planners. Also, we scrutinize the ideas of a socioecological transformation and the expectations for a social collective/community, which can be found among city planners, city administration, and the co-housing groups themselves.

The concept of a responsabilization of citizens implies that the creation of participatory venues intends to instrumentalize citizens for the goals of a specific project. As we are going to show, we could indeed identify such a strategy that includes mainly political goals from the perspective of the city of Vienna, but also—from the viewpoint of the developers and planners of the *Wildgarten*—financial and economic goals. In the interviews, it becomes tangible that members of co-housing groups strongly feel being made responsible for objectives outside of their co-housing initiative. Interviewees report that

they are expected to help create a surplus value for the development area—for instance, by offering project space in the ground floor of their buildings, which would then be accessible to other residents of *Wildgarten* and the public.

Furthermore, interviewees do not consider themselves as “pioneers and innovators” or as a “progressive factor” (I4_Elisabeth) but feel being expected to function as such within the *Wildgarten* project. Additional interviews with representatives of the ARE and of local social services shed light on why co-housing groups were brought into the development of the urban site: the integration of different social groups that constitute (or are soon going to) the *Wildgarten* by providing spaces that are meant to bring people together. The focus of co-housing groups on community and self-determination supposedly predestines them for the task of securing and integrating a functioning local community, which is marked by social, political, economic, racial, and gender diversity. This transfer of public responsibilities by the city of Vienna and the planners of *Wildgarten* makes use of the motivations for self-organization of co-housing groups:

The city has understood that co-housing and collaborative projects create a surplus value for the public space and the surrounding district. [. . .] and now they demand this from the co-housing groups. This is right at the border between abuse and private engagement. (I9_Michaela)

There was a competition where the co-housing groups were chosen. And where it was carefully looked at who was thought to be able to [. . .] deliver for the wider community. (I12_Werner)

As already illustrated above, experts, administrators, and planners understand citizen participation not as directed *inward* ensuring group cohesion, but as something specifically *outward-oriented*. They invoke the image of responsiveness of politics and that citizen participation is a form of preceding groundwork to the later work of planners and experts. In this notion, participation can disburden the city and the project planners by collecting data for expert decision-making, and by (self-)organizing tasks that might also be considered public duties. Consequently,

participation opportunities within the *Wildgarten* planning are clearly defined and narrowed down.

Notably, the *Wildgarten* co-housing initiatives accept the boundaries and limits of the existing participatory processes. However, we must be careful with interpreting this—as the co-housing groups had to apply for a space in the project and were forced to accept its conditions beforehand. Therefore, groups disagreeing with this top-down managed participation might have rejected applying in the first place. In the interviews with the co-housing groups that did receive a spot in *Wildgarten*, we encountered an internalization of managed forms of self-organization and participation. Despite increasing financial pressures (due to rising construction prizes in Austria at the time), the groups continued to realize those public spaces desired by ARE and the municipality—even though they did not have any legal obligations to do so.

In addition, experts and planners often framed participation as a fitting way to establish new, attractive, and contemporary forms of living and urban development. Accordingly, providing participatory opportunities would attract new groups of the active, creative class, and might therefore be an important ingredient to any socioecological transformation of the city. That the creative middle-classes feel attracted by participatory opportunities presents a twofold advantage for the city and its planners:

There are topics that are en vogue and are viewed positively by many. [. . .] and if a project is associated with these topics than this is something that appears positively to many. (I2_Martin)

Future lot values might remain high (because of economically strong groups being attracted) and the top-down steering of participation helps to keep the creative energy and possible dissent and opposition of these participation-knowledgeable groups at bay. In sum, participation is used to attribute the role of pioneers and innovators to the co-housing groups, together with a narrative of democratic engagement. Both aspects—innovation and democratization—are outsourced to the co-housing initiatives who internalize these roles in turn.

One of the defining features of the *Wildgarten* project is that construction opportunities, public space, land prices, and conditions for co-housing are

regulated, which aims at a careful transformation of urban development and housing. The fact that co-housing groups had to apply for a space in the *Wildgarten* in a competitive setting led to a competition of self-commitment towards those rules and regulations. If they wanted a lot for their co-housing, they had to readily accept the conditions and embrace the processes of responsabilization at play. This led to a race between co-housing groups promising public-oriented projects that would be provided in their ground floors, such as food cooperatives, co-working spaces, guest houses, community space, and so on—and which might have turned into heavy burdens by now, as they must be managed and financed by the co-housing groups:

They had very precise specifications [. . .] what they wanted from the [co-housing] groups and which added value for the *Wildgarten*. Which offers the groups had to make in addition to their project to the surrounding neighborhood. . . [. . .] these points you had to work off. (I9_Michaela)

In response, the co-housing groups can purchase a lot for their initiative and help deliver the *Wildgarten's* promise of a (socioecologically) transformative urban development. Yet, if the experiment fails, it is not the responsibility of the city or the expert planners, but—in line with the neoliberal economic paradigm—the individuals' fault because they did not invest or accomplish enough (Graefe, 2019). Any additional costs that might arise through realizing the public ground floor projects would have to be carried by the co-housing group themselves.

According to the experts, city officials and city planners, the co-housing groups are expected to emanate into their neighboring surroundings. They are expected to provide room and space for community activities; be responsible for a positive neighborhood “feeling” and the civil networks; and help prevent conflicts within the *Wildgarten*. Interestingly, in these interviews, the term “community” was extended to *all* the people living in the *Wildgarten* (including those not part of the co-housing groups). In contrast, as mentioned above, members of the co-housing groups rather understand community as a much smaller entity: their own co-housing initiative.

Summing up, through the lens of neoliberal governance, participation and self-management have become part of top-down steering and the outsourcing of public tasks. The city of Vienna and the ARE instrumentalize the organizational, financial, and social resources of co-housing groups—and at least some of the people active in these initiatives report that they feel exploited for goals other than their own. The city steers and to a certain extent controls the *Wildgarten* and its residents through the means of democratic participation opportunities and the management of the people's personal initiative. Arguably, this corresponds to the self-understanding of many citizens in contemporary neoliberalism (Graefe, 2019).

Conclusion

As a result, both perspectives allow us to better understand the values and motivations involved in the *Wildgarten* as a case for how contemporary city planning involves co-housing. Both hypotheses that guided our analysis revealed the political nature of co-housing in the *Wildgarten*: co-housing as a signal for rising democratic demands and self-determination *and* co-housing as an instrument for neoliberal governance and top-down steering by the City authorities. All four co-housing groups scrutinized here represent *both*, a complicated mixture of emancipation *and* control, of democratized urban development *and* instrumentalization of its members. In co-housing, it appears, the self-empowerment of citizens goes hand-in-hand with an increasing top-down steering by the entrepreneurial city.

Furthermore, we have encountered a perceived hierarchy of top-down planning trumping bottom-up civic initiatives, which even the co-housing groups seem to accept willingly, and which contradicts the political marketing strategies attached to the project, both in its ecological and political-participatory sense. As we would argue, this can be traced back to the specific contemporary constellation of urban development.

First, participation requires (a lot of) time and energy and the in-group coordination via *sociocracy* (or similar) is binding a lot of the personal resources. It is often not possible for members of

the co-housing groups to invest more beyond their individual housing group, let alone a broader socioecological transformation of the city or even society. Thus, in the interviews, the personal housing situation appears crucial for the individuals' well-being. Therefore, organizing the co-housing projects bottom-up within a framework of a top-down steering administration might be prioritized over engaging in participatory processes aiming at society at large.

Second, co-housing groups might accept the preconditions of self-determination because these were already defined as binding at the onset of the project. Groups were accepted with a specific project plan that also outlined what they could co-determine and what not. Co-housing projects in the *Wildgarten* are not squatting or militant mobilizations intended to expand the room for activist maneuvers but are groups that operate strictly *within* the legal and bureaucratic spaces provided by the city. Even more so they play the bottom-up role that the city needs to demonstrate innovativeness and responsibility for the much-cited goals of sustainability. In this, they show manners of being activated, readily accepting a somewhat staged experience of democratic involvement.

Third, the co-housing groups *also* experienced a growing exhaustion. On one hand, their in-group coordination requires huge resources (Mock et al., 2019). On the other hand, the groups were attributed roles and functions by the *Wildgarten*'s marketing and planning authorities that did not meet the motivations and understandings of their members. The city administration and planners made them responsible for the public space and community life of the future *Wildgarten*, which only increased the number of tasks and projects to be organized and coordinated. They were framed as pioneers towards a more sustainable form of housing and urban development. Yet, these aspects have hardly been part of the personal motivations of most of the interviewees. Co-housing groups, this is the bottom line, are also burdened with the expectations of a neoliberal form of governance (see also Scheller and Thörn, 2018). Their resources and willingness for self-determination are turned into a highly valuable resource for city planning. However, along the way, the involved members easily wear out.

Thus, as it appears, while democratic and participatory demands have increased greatly during the last decades and have been institutionalized accordingly, the content and understanding of what democratic participation contains has been shifting, too. Yet, these changes might even undermine what had previously been understood as democratic. Whereas cities and public administrations maintain a firm control over what and how is being developed, upholding the public framing of bottom-up spaces and participation remains key to political legitimation. On one hand, development projects need to be presented as modern and in line with the latest ideas of socioeconomic transformation goals to sell them politically and economically. On the other hand, to hand over responsibilities to private citizen initiatives helps projects to materialize successfully under conditions of scarce resources and to minimize objections of citizens by including them into a top-down steered process of citizen participation. Co-housing and the managed autonomy of the resource-rich and self-confident groups of citizens play an important role in reconciling these ambivalent demands. Yet, the democratization they claim to promote has been enclosed within the strict boundaries of a neoliberal entrepreneurial city. Certain forms of empowerment of citizens in housing, such as the co-housing in focus here, might reinforce, or even require a top-down management of city planning. Seen from a different angle, the entrepreneurial city and managed forms of urban development create spaces for bottom-up initiatives. Yet, as we have shown in this article, it is not an either/or. Both perspectives, the bottom-up and the top-down understanding, reveal that empowerment and instrumentalization appear to go readily hand-in-hand—or might even depend on each other. Maybe, securing self-organization and autonomy in the close and private also requires a top-down management and control of higher levels of urban or societal development because otherwise it might easily overstrain both people and the political process at large.

These findings, however, meet several reservations. First, our case number is small and therefore might only allow for the most careful generalizations. Yet, even though the number of interviews might appear limited, and we cannot claim to

represent European planning and co-housing as such, the saturation we perceived in the interviews was striking. Second, we have analyzed self-organization that had been integrated in a top-down planned urban development, which already forecloses many more radical and transformative claims of co-housing. Yet, the results carry important indications for a future research agenda. We believe that our case represents a constellation that extends far beyond housing and planning, and has been addressed in other social fields of contention and transformation, such as feminist movements: that neoliberalism and bottom-up mobilizations might readily go hand-in-hand and transform the understanding of democratization along the way (Schild, 2015). Future research should thus seek to zoom in on the appearing contradiction between empowerment and instrumentalization, between the demands for efficiency and self-organization—and to understand how in contemporary planning and (co-)housing inconsistencies are reconciled.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. In Austria and Germany, the term *Baugruppen* describes a group of citizens establishing a self-organized initiative to jointly build, renovate, or organize a collaborative or collective housing project.
2. See <https://www.wildgarten.wien/der-wildgarten/#versprechen>
3. See <https://www.wildgarten.wien/>

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