

RITUALS OF CARE: REIMAGINING WELFARE

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ABSTRACT

The legendary Swedish welfare state model comprised, on its smallest scale, an infrastructure of ‘common rooms’ (*gemensamhetslokaler*). Here, we explore common rooms as a spatio-social concept inspired by ‘the commons’. We argue that common rooms were fundamental to the Swedish welfare state model until the 1990s, and that the divorce of the spatial dimension from the social apparatus contributed to its decline. Using recent common rooms (*Gemeinschaftsräume*) in subsidized housing in Vienna as our empirical example, we illustrate how collectivity is influenced by changing legal frameworks, with common rooms receiving new attention in recent sustainable housing policies. On the micro level, we explore how these have led to *paranoid constructions*, but also to *reparative acts* and *rituals of care* for common rooms and their communities. What can we learn from this, and what larger structures of care can we develop for the future?

THE WELFARE STATE AS COMMONS

Constitutive of the Swedish model in communal housing estates, common rooms were places for tenants to meet, socialize, educate and organize themselves politically. Government planning treated them as important means of making ‘democratic citizens’. Common rooms were part of a larger network of nationwide spatial structures such as *Folkets hus* (people’s houses), organized and self-managed as

associations, where locals could gather reproducing the welfare society.

Since the early 1990s, common rooms have largely disappeared from new-built housing in Sweden, simultaneously with the selling off of much of *Allmännyttan*, the public Swedish non-profit housing system (1931–2011), which still exists in part, but, since a change of law, has to operate under commercial condition. Common rooms are still central to Viennese housing policy, which was historically rooted in the welfare state of the Red Vienna period, 1918–1933. Unlike in Sweden, in Vienna, common rooms have recently received new attention in policy-making for more sustainable housing. Here, we compare the historical Swedish and current Viennese models. We explore common rooms, once treated by welfare state policies as common goods, tracing their transformations. We speculate on their possible futures in an emerging network of spaces for care and repair.¹

The ‘Swedish model’ of the welfare state was based on the concept of equality as both a core value and a hands-on ‘realpolitical’ aim informing politics and shaping the entire administrative apparatus constructed to realize the envisioned equal society. Public administration bodies on all levels were organized to enable the provision ‘for all’ of equal access to social functions such as housing, healthcare, and education. Solidarity between social classes was seen as the departure point for achieving equality. Notably, historian Lars Trädgårdh speaks of a ‘solidarism based on citizenship’ (2018, p. 81).

Despite the top-down organization of the Swedish model, Trädgårdh considers the Nordic welfare state as initially having been based on ‘the Ostromian regulative principles’ of the commons. Political economist Elinor Ostrom conducted field studies of how local communities self-manage shared natural resources, such as pastures, fishing waters, and forests, showing that when natural resources are jointly used, rules are gradually established for how they are to be occupied and cared for in a way that is economically and ecologically sustainable.

The welfare state and the commons are somewhat similar. *Allemansrätten* (the right of public access), as regulated in Swedish law, guarantees the individual’s right to access rural land, and the early welfare state

introduced the notion of decommodification and the construction of zones of life, such as housing, education, and health, outside the market logic (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 21). These aspects of life were considered social rights, treated not as economic assets but as common goods benefitting all citizens.

A main concern of the Swedish welfare state was housing and urban planning, making architecture central to the effort to achieve equality (Mattsson and Wallenstein, 2009, 2010). ‘Politicians, social visionaries, architects and designers joined forces around the idea of building the Swedish *folkhemmet*, or “people’s home”, a term that suggests the converging of continental modernism’s emphasis on housing with the idea of the welfare state’ (Pelkonen, 2010, p. 124). Also, the Viennese welfare state model united architecture, socially oriented housing production, and public facilities with social reforms in education and health, mixing social housing with other subsidized and privately built rental housing, in contrast to Sweden where the idea of public housing for all predominates.

Since the 1990s economic restructuring, the Swedish welfare state has abandoned some of its most vital parts, including the non-profit rental housing system *Allmännyttan* and subsidies for building common rooms. With this, the everyday culture of common rooms has disappeared. After privatizing much of the former public housing and commercializing many common rooms, the welfare state bureaucracy is now largely separated from its earlier spatial components rooted in the concept of the commons.

COMMON ROOMS IN VIENNA AND THE FOURTH COLUMN OF SUSTAINABILITY

Together with urban planner and activist Beatrice Stude, in summer 2017, Action Archive initiated a field study of common rooms (*Gemeinschaftsräume*) in Nordbahnhof, currently among the largest urban development zones of Vienna.² We were supported by the citizen initiative *Lebenswerter Nordbahnhof* (livable Nordbahnhof), in which Stude is involved. During two weeks of fieldwork including site visits and interviews with residents, district managers and communal housing developers, we visited ten housing projects in the area.³ Residents granted us access and guided us through their common rooms. We learned about various legal forms and subsidies of housing projects in relation to resident experiences of becoming involved in the creation, occupation, and maintenance of their common rooms, which differed greatly from project to project.

Most housing projects at Nordbahnhof were built between 2009 and 2018 and organized as cooperative societies (*Genossenschaften*), the predominant model of housing produced in Vienna with public subsidies. Besides cooperative housing societies, we visited a 1970s social housing project, *Gemeindebau*, at the edge of the new development area,⁴ and the privately financed Park Residences. Since 1995, housing projects

built as cooperative societies and publicly subsidized in Vienna have had to undergo architectural competitions (*Bauträgerwettbewerbe*). Consequently, their design quality is unusually high compared with that of other European subsidized housing. Their production and management uphold stricter rules and policies than do commercial projects, and they usually offer more opportunity for resident involvement in management than do *Gemeindebauten*.

Since 2009, cooperative societies have had to address the new fourth column of the ‘four-column model’ (*4-Säulen Modell*, formerly the *3-Säulen Modell*, i.e., three-column model) of housing development that, besides addressing economic, environmental, and architectural criteria, must now also consider social sustainability. Architectural offices often fulfil social sustainability demands by planning for a ‘settlement management’ (*Besiedlungsmanagement*) process, guided by social managers, before the residents move in. According to resident feedback, such participatory processes have led to more carefully designed common rooms and to higher standards of common room amenities. This is obvious when comparing housing projects from the first and second phases of the development area. For example, in the earlier project *Wohnen am Park* (2009), developed before the social sustainability rules were established, although residents can access a large and ambitiously designed common space with double-height ceilings, the lack of basic facilities such as outlets (omitted for insurance and technical reasons) limits use of the kitchen. In contrast, the project *Interkulturelles Wohnen mit friends* (2013) was conceptualized when the rules were being changed and benefited from a social management process in which tenants could co-design a large venue with access to the inner courtyard (including playground) and the street. This successful common room is equipped with a functioning kitchen that can cater to large groups and has proven to be popular and well used. This common room has opened its doors to the entire neighbourhood.

Amidst the landscape of European post-welfare states, the Viennese housing situation with its regulated provision of common spaces is a relic that has survived dramatic political and economic changes, though not without transformation. The seemingly neutral technocratic language of social sustainability has replaced the contested terms ‘the commons’ or ‘the common’, usually associated with leftwing politics (Amin & Howell, 2018, p. 3).⁵ According to philosopher Michael Hardt, citing philosopher Jacques Rancière, ‘the common’ is the field of the sensible where political recognition and decision-making occur. The common represents a field of struggle irreducible to policy-making, but touching on philosophical questions and the realm of perception (Hardt, 2012). The depoliticized regime of ‘social sustainability’ distinguished from environmental, economic, and cultural sustainability, can be embraced by all

politicians. Despite its divorce from the larger political project of the common, the new social sustainability policy has tangibly produced better common rooms in Vienna.

PARANOID CONSTRUCTIONS AND REPARATIVE ACTS OF CARE

When visiting common rooms at Nordbahnhof, we found evidence of strict in-house regulations, often set by overwhelmed facility managers reacting to complaints. These rules restrict the use of certain spaces at certain times, preventing some tenants from using them at all. The Bike & Swim project (2010–2012) has many common amenities, including a 25-metre rooftop swimming pool. However, this facility is no longer easily accessible. Since disturbed neighbours from the adjacent building complained, the pool has limited opening hours, making it inconvenient for those working regular office hours; inviting friends for a swim is forbidden. A security service, which the tenants do not want but are forced to pay for, was hired to enforce the new rules.

Another reason for limited access to common rooms is liability. A law change in 2011 prohibited storing any objects, such as shoes, plants, bicycles, baby strollers, and children's toys, in corridors and staircases, leading to vast unused spaces in staircases and corridors that were originally designed for storage. These empty spaces are expressions of what we have come to call *paranoid structures*.

Besides paranoid structures of prohibition and limitation, we also found evidence of *reparative care practices*.⁶ These happen during collective and recurrent *rituals of care*, such as parents and children jointly building and decorating play equipment made from cardboard boxes for the unfurnished children's room in PaN-Wohnpark (2011–2013; Figure 1). The joint cleaning sessions at the Wohnprojekt Wien cohousing project (2010–2013) serve the same function. According to tenants, this cleaning not only creates community, but also helps them 'feel the building', a dialectic process between the people and their spaces.

Assuming that laws and regulations are well intended to take care of people and facilitate their interactions, the micro-stories of everyday community life we heard foreground rules, laws, regulations, and policies not only as support, but increasingly as hindrances. Emerging paranoid structures are characteristically experienced as overpowering, disabling, and intractable. The stories also show that these structures are mostly self-inflicted, meaning that they could potentially be repaired. We argue that practices and rituals of care are vital for reproducing and, if necessary, repairing relations between residents and the administrative apparatus. According to the economic geographers Gibson-Graham et al. (2016), rituals of care are resourceful practices that are culturally, economically, and environmentally resilient. Considering rituals of

care as acts of commoning makes them relevant beyond the individual common room on the micro level, part of imagining larger infrastructures of care.

CARE STRUCTURES FOR THE FUTURE?

In her seminal 'What would a non-sexist city be like?', urban historian Dolores Hayden criticizes the concept of the 1935 collective house at John Ericssonsgatan in Stockholm conceived by social reformer Alva Myrdal and architect Sven Markelius (1980). Hayden sees the project as a missed chance to scale up in-house facilities, such as the childcare centre and common kitchen, to connect them to other collective spaces in the neighbourhood, forming a greater network of common rooms serving more than just the tenants of one house. This example, like most collective housing built between the 1930s and 1950s in Sweden, was meant to demonstrate what collective life should be like in the future welfare state. However, such housing also illustrates a dilemma. Based on the idea of sharing services by sharing service workers, collective housing became part of a new economic logic of consumption focused on the home. Leaving behind the core value of solidarity between social classes, community, or the common, was thought of as evolving by itself through residents' proximity to one another (Vestbro, 2014).

Learning from our examples, we imagine common facilities of the Nordbahnhof housing projects, such as the swimming pool and kitchens, becoming connected, and, if necessary, retrofitted to meet residents' needs and wishes. This would be done through acts of commoning involving administrators, insurance companies, and residents, bringing unused or hitherto unusable common rooms to life. Caring for communities would be expressed in the way localized connections become formalized in larger structures. Currently, Action Archive and Beatrice Stude are preparing a play concluding our project in Vienna for the exhibition *Critical Care: Architecture for a Broken Planet*. Inspired by Augusto Boal's interactive Forum Theater, 'Theatre of Care and Repair' will be staged as a prototype recurrent forum where ingrained structures, constructed to disburden our lives but now haunting us, can be questioned and transformed. This play may involve many actors, such as politicians, developers, facility managers, district managers, social management facilitators, architects, urban planners, residents, insurance company executives, and cultural institutions such as the Architecture Centre in Vienna.⁷

We argue that common rooms are critical to the upkeep of common structures on a larger scale, illustrated by Vienna's still intact communal building programmes in which common rooms are jointly conceptualized and maintained by non-profit housing companies, architects, social management facilitators, and residents, and see the loss of Allmännyttan in Sweden as linked to the lack of common spaces. Both examples show that the common requires constant attention and care. As societies transform rapidly, questions for the future

include how common rooms can be made accessible to an extended community, and who will be prepared to take care of them in the future. Besides collective imagination, we need everyday maintenance infrastructure, such as booking systems and managers for common rooms. In conversation, residents frequently pointed out that one must learn how to use common rooms, that group moderation is always necessary, not only at the beginning of a housing project, that self-organization must be planned for, and that common themes must be addressed.

The early welfare state introduced the notion of decommodification, constructing zones of life outside the market logic. Housing, healthcare, and education were considered common rights benefitting all citizens. Is it possible to use the early welfare state as a discursive framework for imagining future care structures? Sensibilities and imaginaries of the common and the collective were embedded in the technocracy of the early welfare state that constructed a network of nationwide common spaces. In line with Hardt and Rancière's suggestion that the common is a field of the sensible and perceptible, a field where political recognition and decision-making occurs, could we develop the idea of spatial networks of commons on various scales, from the smallest common rooms in housing communities to the overarching *allemansrätt* and beyond? We propose the welfare state model as a laboratory for exploring different modes of the common, ranging from material spatiality and imaginaries of the political to hands-on political decision-making with support of policies and regulations.

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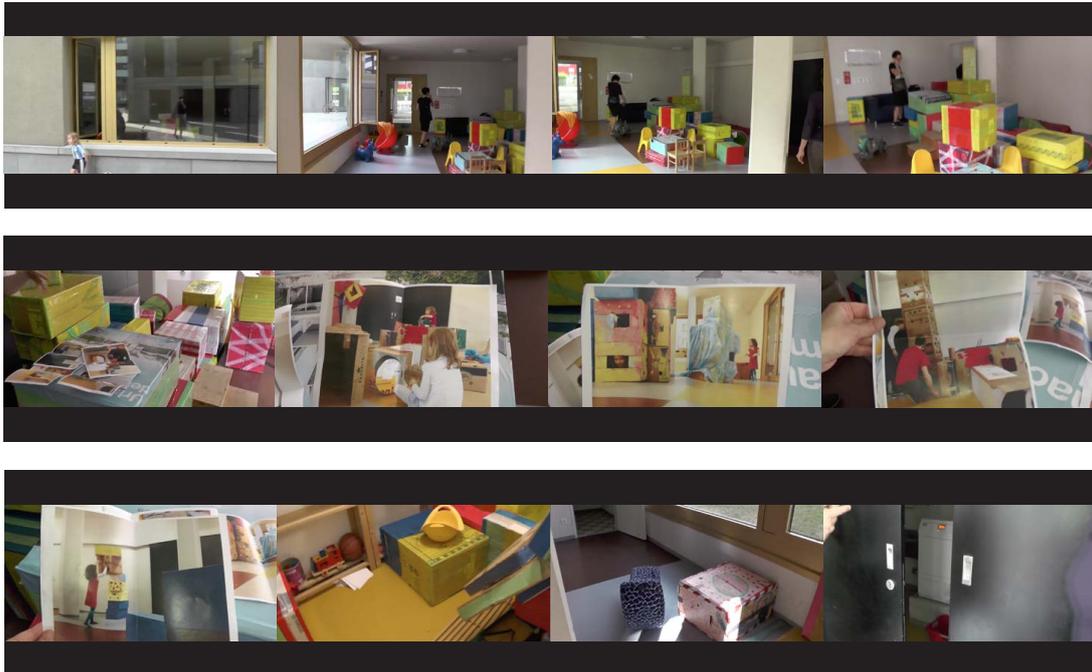


Figure 1: PaN's common room with self-built equipment. Video stills: Action Archive.

¹ This study is an outcome of the 'Caring for Communities' project by Action Archive with Beatrice Stude for *Care + Repair*, the public workspace curated by Angelika Fitz and Elke Krasny for the Vienna Biennial 2017. Action Archive, initiated by Sara Brolund de Carvalho, Helena Mattsson, and Meike Schalk, is a non-profit organization based in Stockholm, dedicated to participatory action research.

² Between 1990 and 2027, the City of Vienna is planning 10,000 new flats and 20,000 workplaces in the Nordbahnhof area (<https://www.wien.gv.at/stadtentwicklung/projekte/nordbahnhof/>).

³ The projects were mostly *genossenschaftliche* projects, such as PaN-Wohnpark, Bike & Swim, COM, Interkulturelles Wohnen mit friends, Junges Wohnen, Wohnen am Park, and citycom2, as well as the cohousing project Wohnprojekt Wien, the privately financed Park Residences, and the Robert Uhlir Hof Wien *Gemeindebau* project.

⁴ *Gemeindebauten* are built and administered by Wiener Wohnen, the public housing company of the City of Vienna.

⁵ Michael Hardt prefers to speak of 'the common'.

⁶ We were inspired by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's famous essay: 'Paranoid reading and reparative reading, or, you're so paranoid, you probably think this essay is about you' (2012).

⁷ 'Theatre of Care and Repair' will be performed in the frame of the exhibition *Critical Care: Architecture for a Broken Planet*, 14 April–9 September 2019, at Architekturzentrum Wien, curated by Angelika Fitz and Elke Krasny.