

LIVING SPACE FOR GLOBAL EDUCATION: THE VINZIRAST STUDENT AND HOMELESS CO-HOUSING PROJECT

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Abstract

A co-housing project has opened its doors in Vienna, Austria, and is unique in being a formalized living space with shared flats for formerly homeless and students intermingled together. How this unconventional housing project came about will be traced back from the idea at a massive student protest to the final restoration of an old inner city house by the architects of Gaupenraub and finally the moving in with all social dynamics and conflicts which could be observed between the inhabitants but also with the chairing NGO "VinziRast". Besides the manifold stories to be told from this spin-off, transdisciplinary work, limitations, challenges and global education opportunities will be highlighted and discussed.

Keywords: Global education, the vinzirast student, homeless, project

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH MOTIVATION

Housing has often been reduced to a place where one might find some sleep in a fast-paced working routine and „home“ is often associated with leisure and an intimate environment. In its minimalist form it is represented by the Japanese sleeping boxes offering a few square meters to rent for a quick sleep before moving on and which can often be found in international airports at an astronomic price. What does "home" mean to globetrotters using the web platform www.couchsurfing.org to find their next host and a cozy bed for their trip around the world or continent? They often find themselves being very warmly welcomed and provided with all information and company they might have wished for. And what about those traveling with <http://campinmygarden.com/> or <https://warmshowers.org> (which focuses on globetrotting cyclists)? These ways of traveling might offer unique opportunities to transgress the boundaries of feeling estranged to a region and its people while offering deeper and eye-level insights into society – hence inscribing themselves in a tradition of global education.

What about permanent residences? Can they be a treasure to global education? In a fast-paced world focused on concepts of usability, utilitarianism, short-term responsibilities, consumerism, lack of responsibility for exploitative systems, competition and anonymity, counter-currents to the mainstream have emerged – in education this might be coined by global education. In the housing sector eco-housing projects (like the semi-nomadic and autarkic housing provider www.wohnwagon.at) have emerged as well as integrative housing bridging generations. Such a co-housing project has opened its doors in Vienna and according to the Reuters staff is unique at a worldwide scale in being a formalized living space with shared flats for formerly homeless and students.¹

I had the chance and felt the obligation to be part of the student protests which led to the emergence of this concept and later on moved in (and out) with the first lot. In the following the focus will be on tracing the history of the project as well as the current relevant aspects and opportunities that such „homes“ offer for those willing to learn and be challenged on their couch and their balcony in their leisure time.

Declaration of interest

None to declare – besides being a former inhabitant of the VinziRast mittendrin.

¹Besides Reuters also quoted in: Endl, M. (2012). *Viele Säulen stützen einen Menschen*. Augustin. 30.10 2012 <http://www.augustin.or.at/article2083.htm>

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#UNIBRENN'T'S UP-SHOOTS: THE EMERGENCE AND TRANSFORMATION OF AN IDEA

The history of this idea until its realization is in itself enshrined in a process largely marginalized from the classical educational careers and the scientific society as well as professional life and the success-oriented society. The project mingling students and formerly homeless is (as so many creative moments) not entirely attributable to a single person, but to a cooperation – it was the living reality during the months-long protests in 2009 against the inefficient higher educational system first in Vienna, Austria, then all over Europe and partially overseas that set the spark.

Criticism was broad and encompassed the mismanagement of financial means, while repeatedly and forcibly (finally illegally) installing school fees though most students already work besides studying in order to finance their education. Furthermore the school fees seemingly mostly financed the bureaucracy, since students largely had to be refunded by the grant system, because of their neediness and while this was ongoing still offering unimproved poor studying conditions over decades as for example overflowing classes (taking classes sitting on the floor) and narrow-minded solutions like restricting access to university in order to cater for elites and children from wealthy families with all long-term consequences for society as observable in the Anglo-Saxon system.

These protests were initiated by the students of arts and found immediate resonance which led to the auditorium maximum (largest lecture hall) being squatted as well as a wave of solidarity with demonstrations and similar actions at a national and later on at an international level. These protests partially paralyzed the university life and gave room to an alternative program: talks by critical philosophers as Konrad Paul Liessmann, sketches by satirists like Alfred Dorfer, the UN rapporteur Jean Ziegler visited this space with a lecture as well as musicians with sociocritical statements.

The protests were based on creative forms of protests like the clowns army and besides sleeping facilities open to everybody also offered a platform for reflection on communication and changes urged for society. The decisions were taken on a grassroots democracy basis with plenary sessions being accessible remotely via live streams. Care was taken to allow for a broad inclusive process with a gender-sensible list of speakers (when remarkably more men had spoken, a woman raising her hand would be bypassed further to the top of the list) as well as defining the space as a non-discriminatory space (e.g. in terms of sexism, racism etc.). The pooled idea of the people gathered indeed offered ideal grounds for several spin-offs that still exist today as a valuable complementing puzzle to the society and allowed for many instructive personal developments.

The self-organized kitchen was supported by the working hands of all and one could pay as much as one could or wanted for the food. It is to note that large parts of society were showing their solidarity and not only school teachers, unions, political parties, but every morning several stacks of warm croissants appeared quite automatically at the gates of the university while vegetable donations were flowing in in humongous amounts.

Why all these detailed descriptions? It will be important for the following and in order to understand the roots and the basis for such a project to be born. Free or unconditionally affordable food, a huge warm place to sleep in with a sleeping bag, a challenging cultural-political program, an environment that was not automatically excluding people with psychiatric diseases or handicaps (on the contrary the crisis management team and first aid station run by the students was supporting integrative or co-existence approaches), feeling welcome etc... led to rumors spreading amongst the homeless community and an inflow of people from the streets. They became part of the community instead of being marginalized, which might have weakened the image of the protests in the media nevertheless this new responsibility was borne by the students as part of their draft of a critical society.

What however should happen to them, when finally after a few months and just before Christmas time the police ended the squat? Where were those to go who as foreigners were not entitled to programs sheltering homeless people and did not have access to the state based social net of support? What with those who couldn't stay away from their addiction to alcohol and may not stay in such places? What with those psychotic homeless people who enjoyed the exchanges with students... to the extent of having a clear mind while interpreting a most beautiful Mozart sonata on one of the pianos brought to the squatted audimax lecture theater?

This encounter with Raffael was one of the moments that burned themselves in my mind... I only knew him as a person running around on a fast pace, wetting himself and making little sense, but on the piano this middle-aged gentleman would tell me where to improve my interpretation of Bach and a bit of his story that led him astray as one of the promising piano students passing entrance exams to finding himself on the street – advising me on how not to end up doing similar errors. A few minutes of sanity and then I didn't see him again. I was struck and knew that such persons could teach profound lessons on life (and on the piano).

Most obviously other bridges and bonds across society were laid meanwhile and so a group of students grew the idea of a shared living space for homeless and students out of the frustration of finding those they came to know out on the street once again in winter time. Interestingly enough during the protests the social workers followed the homeless into the audimax lecture theater and tried to recruit some of the students (amongst the crisis management team run on a voluntary basis) for their organizations because they were impressed by the interpersonal and organizational competencies found on-site.

One night while walking around the not-so-young and “eternal student” Peter Nitsche, who up to now is highly involved in several grassroots common welfare projects and has quite a colourful vita from pedagogy to fine arts, from Tibetan medicine and wild herbs to filming and political work, had the idea of using one of the long-term empty houses close to university as a living space shared by students and homeless. He contacted a building contractor, Mr. Haselsteiner, who had previously supported other charitable projects and tried to persuade him. Via Mr. Haselsteiner he got in touch with Cecily Corti from the homeless shelter VinziRast (under the aegis of the church), who was impressed by the ideas and the eagerness of the students and the project was sealed. A group of students from the student protests, Peter Nitsche, Emily Kollarz, Gregor Kollwanger and Karin Stanger (to name a few) took over the cooperation and planning together with the VinziRast team after Mr. Haselsteiner put the considerable financial means to their free disposition in order to buy the dilapidated building situated in a wealthy and central area of Vienna. The planning, construction and renovation work of the 150 year old Biedermayer house were concerted with the architect Alex Hagner, who worked together and at eye-level with homeless people at the construction site². He

²Stemmer, M. (2013). *Obdachlose in der Studenten-WG*. Der Standard. 21.05.2013.

repeatedly stated not to have had a more dedicated and responsible team on any of the constructions sites he had worked before - two of the workers passed away due to their long-term medical sequelae of their rough life during that time. The architecture itself could easily fill a scientific review, with all the attention paid to details: restoration was done carefully and old material recycled, it became a low-energy house, water is caught from the gutter for the plants, the wood from vegetable transport boxes were used to line a parquet on the ceiling, the shared flats are smaller as opposed the large communal kitchens and living rooms in order to facilitate mingling, at the ground floor the wood, sawing and steel workshops as well as a restaurant with no pressure to consume should offer opportunities to open the house to the neighborhood and allow for creative occupation and finally an ample and wooden roof-top terrace as well as a large veranda should offer a slice of luxury while using cheap materials in a creative way...

All the way the team was working together, however from the students' side only two are left today... (why this is so, will be discussed in the following chapters).

In May 2013 the house was inaugurated and welcomed its inhabitants who were picked again in a collective process and were to live in mixed shared flats with always homeless and students sharing a flat together. An exhibition of art works by Elsie Herberstein, who came to the project through her family ties with Cecily Corti and has previously published a sketchbook with notes on a homeless shelter in Paris, was part of the program. She came from France to draw portraits of the inhabitants and those working at the construction site while they were refurbishing the walls. This offers an example how any discipline can embrace global education targets.

Completing the protest culture of the rather up-scale opening of the house by the wife of the Austrian president amongst others there was a rebellious line-up: the quite exceptional instrumental band La Masutra famous for composing a protest song against the abolition of the integrity of the International Development Studies curriculum honored the crowd with their witty lyrics.³ (International development studies were a critically minded bachelor and masters degree challenging global, social and economic disparities as well as the role of the key players and the aid system. It was curtailed to a master – seemingly the history of the African or South American continent, international politics, economy, sociology as well as global questions can well be fitted into two instead of six years training only in order to save the budget of the university who at that time was ruled by the not so angelic mathematician “Prof. Engl” – according to himself – called into to the directorate to produce beautiful financial statistics for the uni. Who then needs bothersome critical minds? Especially if the curriculum was initially designed as a bottom up process by students and to the dismay of some it became increasingly and quite uncontrollably popular across European borders at an unseen pace).⁴

GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY, DOTMOCRACY AND “IT DOESN'T FIT THE CONCEPT...”

After the moving in of all house members decisions over decisions had to be taken – but how? On the one hand executive board members uttered their willingness and relief to delegate as much as possible to the house community in order for the inhabitants to sort as much as possible themselves. On the other hand the authority of the board and its decisional capacities were not to be undermined. It was quickly apparent that at the student level grassroots democracy with its sign language allowing to speed up discussions was the gold standard. Representative democracy as well as top down approaches were not much trusted. The executive board members were partly neither familiar with the

³ <http://www.lamasutra.org/index.html>
International Development-Studies- Song: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6eRKgNiZns>

⁴ More detailed information can be read up on:
Endl, M. (2012). *Viele Säulen stützen einen Menschen*. Augustin. 30.10 2012
<http://www.augustin.or.at/article2083.htm>
Aichhorn, V. (2010). *Obdachlose in die Mitte holen*. *Bezirkszeitung Alsergrund*. 02.11.2010
<http://www.meinbezirk.at/wien-09-alsgrund/chronik/obdachlose-in-die-mitte-holen-d28376.html>

grassroots democracy nor used to stick to a list of speakers in chronological order, even less to mind a gender balance amongst the speakers. The ex-homeless seemed mostly surprised and unsure how to respond – being used to letting “them (note by the author: authorities) decide who make better decisions than us”. Part of them renounced to attend the plenary sessions which after very tough negotiations were shaped into grassroots democracy. The other part made use of their voice and adapted to this new right to shape things in the community and took on responsibilities as well as animating discussions and decisions. During the first months there still weren't any formal “house rules”... each shared flat did their own, as did then again each floor for the communal spaces at their level and the once monthly plenary session molded the larger decisions. This last part seemed the hardest. The executive board didn't trust the community to look after the top roof veranda and though promised to be openly accessible locked it down so it “would be clean for the graduation parties” (note: this fancy place with a touch of luxury cannot be legally rented out by this Not-for-profit-organization but a “suggested donation of 400€” was the engineered loophole). In general the board had quite restrictive policies at hand regarding keys of the workshops etc. which finally were thrown over, similarly to their ideas about binding cleaning assignments for individuals or restrictive (no overnight) visit policies.

What emerged from the community was quite different: lists where hung up where everyone's name was listed as well as fields for date and tasks performed, so that whenever someone did a bit of cleaning he/she could fill in what was done (so really lazy ones could be spotted at least) – everything on a voluntary basis with no binding schedule.

Furthermore one floor established the use of dotmocracy as a means of deciding quickly within larger groups with differing schedules on emerging problems: this means that a sheet of paper on the communal fridge has a proposal on it and underneath one can make a dot in the field of different graduations between “agree” and “disagree” with ones signature and possibly a comment. With dotmocracy for example it was decided to get rid of the huge donated TV in the communal living room since all the dots were favorable.

These examples illustrate how insight into political decision making and its alternatives can be won via a housing community project and how tricky it can be to involve people who are used to decisions being made for them (in homeless shelters, during imprisonment, within a violent childhood, while being administrated by the unemployment services, etc.). However not only those unused to speak up for themselves have a chance to develop more self-determination and thinking in alternatives, but also those used to placing their statements in debates learn from the others: often (sadly and discussed more in detail later on) Gramsci's concept of hegemony proves right but as a first step to allow for a sincere inclusion into debates the persons used to academic debates are requested to speak “so that everyone can understand” – an important skill if a more global understanding and empathy is to be achieved.

These processes can be analyzed under the global education perspective as a didactic of opening doors towards solidarity and challenging “the obviously true” via an environment permissive to irritating questions instead of instigating rules/norms/knowledge (unilaterally).

Nevertheless “It doesn't fit the concept...” is the final bastion of the leading team as a questionable veto. This is when solidarity comes into play and the restrictive visitor policy is undermined by a lively traffic of illegal visitors through the house (friends, family, people urgently in need of a shelter, partners, one night stands, daughters and sons or just children)... and the forced-upon policy of having to report overnight stays, have them in a separate room for which to pay, is just bypassed by a system of solidarity.

VISITING GRAMSCI AT VINZIRAST MITTENDRIN, OR CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK?

This raises the question whether the subaltern as coined by Spivak can have a say when faced with those in power. In this case Gramsci's concept of hegemony often proved valid: the ex-homeless were

often easy to seduce (which doesn't mean that all the students used the chance to speak up for themselves). Partially the formerly homeless were not keen on losing this “beautiful house” they could call their home, especially in a context where oftentimes authority was made clear not to be challenged. Hence some would accept and defend the initially put forward “offer to show gratitude to the board of the house”: working for free in the restaurant (a GesmbH “separate” from the house, but the profit would go to the VinziRast association) on a weekly basis being even denied the tip, though they had been initially determined not to play along with what they themselves defined as exploitation. Similarly the eloquent argumentation of the high society chair-women of the VinziRast, though sometimes quite illogical and against the interests of the inhabitants, was often accepted in the same way the Queen of England or the Church are glorified and venerated amongst the poor, even though both have accumulated considerable amounts of wealth overtime which is not shared out to the needy. At times where the leading board of the VinziRast feared not being able to win on conflicts of importance to them or set rules, the invasion of the plenary session by board members working in a different project and house was used as strategy: being invited for (not so objective) mediation purposes they suddenly made up around half of the crowd and actually gave their opinion though only being briefed about one side of the story and were used to build up social pressure even though it had been decided initially that a maximum of three board members were allowed on the plenary sessions. After having to listen to the buoyant discussions and the contrasting opinions from the inhabitants, it was noticeable that those mediators didn't dare interfering, needed to close their information gap and remained mute.

MIGRATING BOOKS AND EXPLOSIVE LIBRARIES

A library and study room were meant to be openly accessible for others and installed on the first floor. Before the official inauguration of the house some volunteers from the VinziRast association took on the responsibility to put the donated books that had been randomly shelved into a logical order. The inhabitants had added some of their private books they recommended into the shelves so that they could be accessible for everyone. Unfortunately it was noted way to late that quite a few books (private ones and donated) were chucked away instead of being passed on by eager to help affluent volunteer housewives called in by the board: amongst others they encompassed testimonies on world war two, as well as an expensive Japanese dictionary (manifold French dictionaries were kept as well as other colonial/European languages) and a compendium about sexual violence within the church (!) – while deeply trivial literature and a multitude of esoteric and religious books were left in under the section “psychology and religion”.

This unfortunate incident entailed heated discussions on self-determination of the inhabitants regarding the library, the (il) legitimacy of throwing books and donations away as well as which standards of segregation were to be used. This finally led to the decision that the library should be managed communally by the inhabitants and that further interference from the side of the association was not appreciated.

Besides the communal use of private books, the inhabitants also installed a raspberry pi computer to access the internet: This was developed at the University of Cambridge and is a computer the size of a bank card which works entirely open source and costs around 25 USD. This was developed in order to make an easily adaptable computer for pedagogic purposes in areas and schools where access to IT is limited at an international scale. This “gadget” hence represents a tool encouraging the acquisition of knowledge not only in a passive way since its open source code challenges commercial IT products and tackles curiosity as well as DIY skills (of programming or using these malleable computers as interfaces for other ideas).

Furthermore a book from <http://www.bookcrossing.com/> was abandoned to be found: this is a platform where books can be sent to travel around the world trough being left anywhere in a marked plastic bag with instructions and tracked online and then picked up by a random interested person. Besides these

two initiatives the wall was self-conquered for critically minded art: a collage of magazine faces and bodies intermingled with “space invader against racism/sexism...” signs and other activist tags.

ON MEN'S WOOD WORKSHOPS AND WOMEN'S SEWING MACHINES (AND NAUGHTY BICYCLES)

A Finnish inquiry has set the targets for basic education in 2020⁵ – amongst others manual and communication as well as innovative skills were seen as valuable global education targets. In this perspective it was an interesting decision within the VinziRast mittendrin to open different workshops for the community: a wood and steel workshop as well as a sewing room. Besides the global education aspect the therapeutic work, psychological well-being as well as mingling into the neighborhood represented central considerations. Many students and ex-homeless (especially at the formerly squatted audimax) have a high interest in music while having quite advanced trumpet, piano, guitar, singing skills... a room for music was however not anticipated or not defined, because of concerns regarding “noise” and the neighbors.

It is also quite interesting how tricky the issue of where to store the bicycle became: technically and legally every dorm has by law to accommodate enough parking space for bicycles. The VinziRast mittendrin however doesn't officially run as a dorm, hence this law was not applicable. The leading board insisted that bikes could be parked outside on the public space, ignoring the fact that with over 6000 bikes stolen a year Vienna is ranking just behind the theft strongholds Berlin and Hamburg and that bikes are one of the main and cheapest means of transportation for the less wealthy.⁶ Leaving those in the courtyard would disturb the restaurant costumers but a rain exposed patch of about two square-meters was finally successfully lobbied and subsequently not surprisingly happened to be constantly crammed with bikes.

Let's however return to the workshops... they were the source of long discussions, because involvement of women was not anticipated (though not unwelcome the involvement of motivated ladies fell prey to recurring amnesia): those responsible for the workshops were automatically assigned men – only after several reminders that there were interested women present, did the board accept to hand over one set of keys to a keen woman too. It was furthermore clear that the workshop were going to be run by a male carpenter and in the following mostly men were approached regarding coordination regarding the workshop. The offer to invite the feminist carpenter team from “sunwork”⁷ who had long-standing experience working with schools and unemployed people was met with surprise by the board and quickly forgotten.

Similar stereotypes were found in other areas... The sewing workshop only involved women (not by explicit male exclusion though) and the volunteers involved in helping the board members of the VinziRast were in overwhelming numbers women (only two persons however are employed with a salary by the VinziRast, one being a man).

THREE WOMEN DOWN – ON BABIES AND OTHER INADEQUACIES

It was regretted that there were so few homeless women on the streets of Vienna – the board was unaware of hidden homelessness amongst women – so that after one female inhabitant was hooped out for inappropriate behavior only one female ex-homeless remained in the house (the excluded lady repeatedly stated having worked as a b-girl... and this might explain part of her disinhibited behavior and eccentricities, but excluding such persons would mean excluding any person visibly branded from

⁵ <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/bb4e/finlandEn.pdf> [accessed 09.11.2016]

⁶ <http://presse.geld.de/geld-artikel/studie-fahrradklau-in-deutschland-osterreich-schweiz-haufigste-diebstahle-pro-einwohner-u-a-in-munster-bern-oldenburg-salzburg-schadenshohe-allein-in-deutschland-uber-120-mio-e/>

⁷ <http://www.sunwork.at/> and <http://sunwork.at/modellprojekte/elektra-lehrwerkstatt.html> [accessed 09.11.2016]

sexwork/prostitution). The unbalanced gender ratio tipped further over when two other emancipated young students moved out – amongst others because of the pressure to conform to gender stereotypes. The unsaid is that children were not expected to be guests to the VinziRast mittendrin since this environment was declared as unsuitable for young children hence the building did not conform to child safety. This means that families are turned down or that only one member can live in the house without the children – something inconceivable for many women that temporarily live in battered women shelters or for parents in general.

Nevertheless children have been visitors repeatedly even if secretly (since many do have close relatives and friends with children) – as soon as the board came to know those children were chucked out with their family and visiting policies were established including the constraint of having to notify visitors to the board and that guests have to sleep in a separate payable room, if he/she was to stay longer than one or two nights. On a humorous note: alternating one night stands were denounced as absolutely unacceptable by the chairwoman of the VinziRast.

Another regrettable gender-relevant incident was the sexual harassment and stalking of a female inhabitant of the vinzirast mittendrin within the house premises – which was perpetrated by a gentleman known to the board (as inhabitant of the other homeless shelter run by the VinziRast). No action was taken and it was especially refused to relocate the gentleman's psychotherapy to another location than the room on the same floor than the victim's, though the man was not even living on the VinziRast mittendrin premises – the request being termed as intolerant against persons with mental illnesses. The subject of harassment was rather played down and no open discussion was sought. This changed when the house community decided to call the police. Then the board got a befriended psychotherapist involved: the latter invited both the perpetrator and the victim (who didn't know each other much before) to a little productive conversation again on the house premises. This was followed by another conversation where Ms. Corti joined in – according to the victim an "impossible conversation" ensued which made her leave the discussion. There was a lack of neutral positioning to be observed, the therapist having to defend her client and her being a friend of Ms. Corti who led a board who at no point clearly positioned itself to matters of sexism. In this context the statement that the short trousers (it was summer and the lady was a cyclist) were causative to the harassment fell. Medically speaking victim-blaming is unacceptable and the modus operandi observed ranges between lacking awareness of the delicacy to most absurd proceedings which are prone to engender to re-traumatization – particularly when minding that about a fifth of women have faced sexual and/or partner-related violence before.⁸

MONTY PYTHON ON BUILDING A COMMUNITY

The previously mentioned tense situation regarding visitors was the result of the board holding on to the hypothesis that it was important "that a community forms". One could argue that with all the gossip going around the house and the decisions being taken in the community – a community feeling had already arisen. Is there the need for everybody to be best friends and to define a community via the exclusion of others... "the strangers" to the house? This might be perceived as rather unsettling especially since those who physically built the house and had been involved right from the beginning found it difficult to find a room in the house hence were denied to be part of the community. Who are then "the others"? Such statements had an unsettling resemblance to the networking of the rich via Lion's Club and other clubs with restricted access as well as a taste of the process of crowd control meticulously described under the pen name Morton Rhue by Todd Strasser in the novel "The Wave" (1981). This escalating school experiment based on real circumstances had three central slogans, one of them being "strength through community".

⁸ FRA European Union Agency For Fundamental Rights. (2012) *Gewalt gegen Frauen: sie passiert täglich und in allen Kontexten*. Press release. <http://fra.europa.eu/de/press-release/2014/gewalt-gegen-frauen-sie-passiert-taglich-und-allen-kontexten> [accessed 09.11.2016]

In this context the excerpt from the lyrics of the Monty Pythons song “All for one” is quite indicative of realities of unreflected group dynamics and membership.

*“All for one
One for all
All for one
And one for all
Some for some
None for none
Slightly less for people we don't like
And a little bit more for me”*

FREE MARKET SOCIAL ECONOMY – CHARITABLE OR PROFITABLE?

The central question here is: no money is dirty? Is it acceptable that a place for alcoholics be sponsored by a brewery (in this case Ottakringer)? The social acceptance of alcohol being so high – it seemed unthinkable to the leading team to run a gastronomy without alcohol knowing that there had already been cases of self-endangering (such as trying to grasp an electric saw blade) and running-down the beer tap before the restaurant opened its doors. The stance being that it was a person’s individual freedom to choose to drink excessively – this however knowing that students and alcoholics on the same ground would lead to a quite permissive milieu for alcohol consumption while there are people living in the house who are just back from their detox. One person freshly back from detox hence was in no time successfully hooked back on heavy drinks.

This might seem frustrating, the issue at stake however is that as a matter of fact the restaurant largely profits of alcohol and its alcoholic inhabitants especially since the chef doesn’t want to set any limits and all the responsibility is pushed on the individual who is threatened with losing his/her room, if he/she was to be exceedingly verbally or physically abusive. It is to note that problems rarely arise from drinking in the room or the beer bought at the supermarket or outside: either those persons stay in their room or have to find their way home... which somehow represents a challenge that is not present when the bar is just on the ground floor. Another ethical conflict is that their friends and flat-mates (who are working in the restaurant) are the ones forced by the chef to serve their completely drunk and shattered friend – which leaves them in a dilemma.

Working for the restaurant or the VinziRast itself is another difficult subject since a lot has happened unofficially, bypassing gastronomic work/salary regulations for all but a minimal official staff of five. Similarly also regarding the carpenter in the workshop – it seems to be easy to abuse those who might not have had a straight career and have addictions or a criminal past. Whatever low the salary and the lacking health and social insurance they may feel obliged to honor the chance that life has given them.

The differing understanding and appreciation of the lieu itself (and art) as well as the social sellout is illustrated by the action taken with respect to the Banksy graffiti which was found in the house: part of the wall was removed and auctioneered by the board for a few hundred euros to a private person. It is to say that Banksy’s works are – as their inherent rebellious, subversive and thought-provoking nature as crème de la crème of street art – usually appreciated for free as gift to all on street walls and public places or, at times, find their way to the most prestigious international art museums and galleries.

FOOD COOPS FOR SUSTAINABLE, SELF-SUFFICIENT AND RESPONSIBLE FOOD CHAINS?

With the opening of the VinziRast a food coop was also introduced to the house. A food coop consists of a group of people who fetch fruits, oil, vegetables, grains, juices, even shampoo etc. on an alternating basis from the farmers, hence bypassing intermediate trade therewith also long transport and cooling or CO2 conservation chains. The bottom line is that they allow for easier planning for the farmer by guaranteeing to sell off specific amounts ordered and 100% of the return goes to the farmer – no marketing etc. needed, while the gap between the farmer and the consumer is bridged. Of course

the produce is seasonal, regional, organic and in this specific case the food coop is vegan, which means that costs and the energy wasted for the cool storage of milk, meat and cheese are nil. The food is fetched once a week: on that afternoon a week one person is responsible for the “shop” – a room where all the members can pop by and fetch what they ordered or may need.

Organizations such as food coops try to work bare of hierarchies, which entails that decisions are taken in plenaries where each member can shape the organization in a grassroots democracy. In Vienna there are quite a few of these food coops and they are spreading quite quickly. This choice was quickly adopted by the inhabitants, however more from the students side than the ex-homeless who often preferred to stick to discount supermarket ware. It is to note that part of the food was also dumpster dived by the students (partially from organic supermarkets) and that the formerly homeless inhabitants felt skeptical about this way of acquiring food. This practice of taking food from the bins has sometimes been labeled as theft by the supermarket chains (huge amounts are thrown away in order not to dump the price and to cater for the large variety of fresh vegetables, breads and other perishable goods still available just before closing time on a Saturday) and has meanwhile found a legal platform via official cooperations with the supermarket chains: <http://at.myfoodsharing.org/>. A movie offering a deeper insight on food waste is: “Taste the waste” by Valentin Thurn (2011) and it is this documentary work that triggered efforts in changing the food chain policies within the German government as well as building the leverage and awareness to force conventional production to cooperate with projects like <http://at.myfoodsharing.org/> for at least image purposes.

It is to note that the food coop was not that welcomed by some of the members of the board of management who had difficulties to embrace the idea and couldn't picture how food could be stored in a room that doesn't have a fridge and is not essentially that cool. The “necessity” for a room of silence/meditation room was easier to endorse than such a project that is often in the hands of younger people and has a touch of “guerrilla”. More about this on: <http://foodcoops.at/>

Nevertheless as part of the steps towards a reintegration into a regular work life and its responsibilities as well as an occupational “therapy” an elevated herbs and vegetable bed was installed on the terrace with the help of the students from the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences in Vienna (the BOKU). It is meant to be taken care by the house community and care was taken in the choice of seeds and plants (i.e. plants from the seed conservation NGO “Arche Noah” and similar projects were preferred). This approach can be thought on a more global scale within the aim of the urban gardening network <http://www.gartenpolylog.org/de> which propagates communal gardens as places conveying political, ecologic, social, pedagogic and personal (i.e. views on the world and global relationships) room for action.

SUMMARY: HISTORIES FROM AFAR COUNTRIES, REBELLIOUS FRUITS AND LIFE-LONG LEARNING

It is to conclude that the VinziRast mittendrIn offers a rare meeting and communal living space for indeed heterogeneous parts of the society. More information or a different viewpoint can be found in Hannappels text which focuses on the possible degrees and challenges in participation at the VinziRast⁹. The specificities of this living arrangement engender that the focus is laid on (re)acquiring many competences/skills that are described within the set of global education targets on the one hand, on the other hand it challenges the participants whichever social background they belong to, to reconsider their preconceptions (e.g. it often are the ex-homeless who wish for more cleanliness as opposed to the students) and develop the ability to adapt to and to learn from each other. This may be a long way to go... and it often seems easier to learn within one inhabitant to the other as vertically

⁹ Hannapel, L. (2011) *Herausforderungen bei der Beteiligung in Planungsprozesse am Beispiel des Projekts VinziRast MITTENDRIN*. Seminar paper for the Sociology Department of the Technical University. 30.09.2011 http://www.vinzirast.at/fileadmin/www_files/mittendrIn/Hannappel-VinziRast-MITTENDRIN.pdf

between the inhabitants and the board. As an example quite a few formerly homeless who live on social security are quite impressed how the students manage to live on so little money by going dumpster diving, not needing the newest of the newest and rather going to the second-hand, MA 48 (garbage collection) or free shops (so-called Schenke or Kost-nix-laden... the physical pendant to the freecycle networks on the world wide web). Countless discussions have been led about the value of money in social life and orthodox versus heterodox economy amongst those formerly homeless and the students. In this house one can learn face to face from the high-flying high potentials about their commitment to social critical projects, one can hear Austrians and native-speakers chatting in Swahili at the patio, one will find many open doors to creatively refurbished rooms, inhabitants might tell about their time in prison and the fear that the son might repeat the same errors, and lots of knowledge can be found from architecture, political actionism, theater acting etc. and both sides be it the socially committed students or the former homeless have had extensive travel experiences as refugees, following a beloved one into another country, as mercenary to the french Legion, wanting to see the world or as bodyguard to some Saudi Prince.

Histories are told about the faraway homes as e.g. Tanzania, Senegal, Czech Republic, Afghanistan etc. and Chechen food is served. Interestingly the disparities between continents still remain minor as opposed to the social disparities from the dumps to the high society – Bourdieu's social divide and the consequences of his “habitus” sometimes remains insurmountable. Many creative and social-critical constructive fruits have emerged from the squatting of the audimax and the so-called unbrennt movement: Besides the Vinzi Rast mittendrin, a critical-satirical newspaper “über.morgen” has emerged as well as WienTV which are socio-critical TV news screened online by anyone interested in participating. Sadly, the WienTV¹⁰ project was refused a room at VinziRast for being too much avantgarde, too political and critically-minded while not “being of use to the house”.

That working with homeless is quite “en vogue” and that the stories told in such milieus can be worth a listen is exemplified by homeless people being invited to share their life experience during living-book days at libraries but also by the recent “social-entrepreneurship or -innovations” like Pragulic in Prag or Supertramp in Vienna where homeless people have been asked to offer (at times quite pricy) guided tours through the city as they see it. While being a chance it also bears the trap of social voyeurism similar to “humanitarian tourism/travel” or disaster tourism (sometimes also referred to as dark, black or grief tourism).

As has been mentioned earlier on several lines of conflict have arisen between the so-called audimaxists (or like-minded critical inhabitants) and the board – which led to the sad circumstance, that all students but two left the project at the board-level (as a reminder: those who actually had the idea and organized the capital to buy the building). Today in the boulevard media it has become a pet project of VinziRast and Ms. Corti. It would have had the potential to be more – for example not to deceive in the gender perspective: whether at the level of restraining women in their role and audibility, or quite basically at failing to notice the need for sheltering the less obviously visible women on the streets, the parents with children who built the very building, ladies who may be socially inappropriate when displaying the scars from working in the “sex trade”, or just refraining from passivity and victim blaming when sexual harassment occurs under their umbrella. Still, this house is indeed a house with many open doors intellectually as well as physically and in itself a quite respectable achievement. Formerly homeless experience more freedom to decide and how to negotiate it. Whose rooms are these today? Who is to decide? Who decides what “fits into the concept”?

Organizational life-long learning would be the challenge for the VinziRast mittendrin over the next few years... The “classical” homeless shelter that the VinziRast has been running for about a decade in the 12th district initially didn't allow foreigners (!), dogs or couples in... it is only over time and as a

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<http://wientv.org/>

process of negotiation that those were allowed to use the emergency shelter too. As a movement issued against social Darwinism, now partly run by wealthy housewives with Helper syndrome, this house in its foundation already bridges large disparities let-alone the homeless as a social fringe group. By this it teaches tolerance, solidarity with the poor, equality, inclusion and co-operation and hence promotes aspects of global education. While the architect tried to imagine a building that represents the good life for all principle as well as the careful use of resources [and was awarded the Urban Living Award]¹¹, one might wonder if those leading the project now are able to genuinely grasp that their power results from the “unfair distribution of opportunities and resources” and self-critically reflect on it. The VinziRast mittendrin might definitely challenge attitudes and encourage reflection on the world – especially on what is possible and what not. The poor might have more need but also experience and fearlessness to rely on their social capital, systems of cooperation [bare of ideas relying on trading favors] or “entraide” [as coined by the french word] – here those who are in possession of wealth may have the opportunity to learn. Unfortunately as Eric Kandel puts it in his preface to “The age of insight” (2012): “A brain scan may reveal the neural signs of depression, but a Beethoven symphony reveals what depression feels like.”

Can one teach to someone who lived life in comfort what excruciating hunger, poverty or despair feels like? I wonder. The only time I received food without requesting any was from a seller in Cameroon. Though I belonged to those privileged he read hunger in my eyes. It wouldn't happened here [in the so-called 1st world]. Here I find myself ironically illegally hiding someone in my room who refurbished this homeless/students co-housing project with his hands and lost his flat – he was turned down at VinziRast mittendrin because he had a newborn child and children were not allowed. Now that finally his wife and the baby have left him because of his precarious living circumstances there is no room free anymore and dare he sleep on the terrace or the workshop where he works everyday! I don't think precarious life can be comprehensible to those who only know wealth or forgot about the post-war times. It would need a lot of Beethoven.

LIMITATION AND BACKGROUND

This text reflects the beginnings of the VinziRast mittendrin from its birth to its early first steps at a half year. The author moved into the VinziRast mittendrin with the first batch of inhabitants as an international development studies student and is now training as a trauma surgeon.

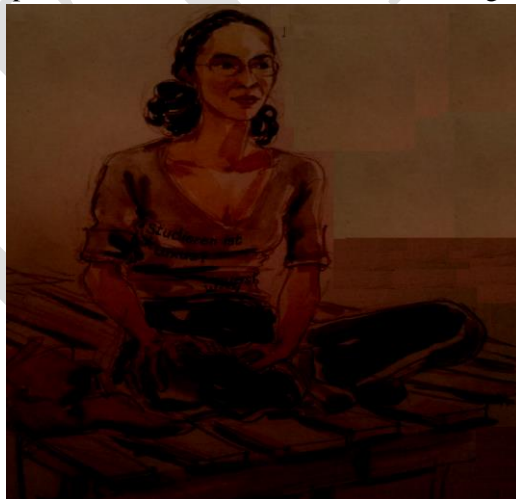


Figure 1: Portrait of the author at the former construction site of VinziRast mittendrin by Elsie Herberstein in 2013.

¹¹

09.11.2016]

http://www.azw.at/data/media/cms_binary/original/1393434212.pdf [accessed



Figure 2: Peter Nitsche, who had the idea to convert the long-term vacant pram manufacture into a student/homeless co-housing project.

<http://www.meinbezirk.at/wien-09-alsgergrund/chronik/peter-nitsche-hatte-die-idee-fuer-das-haus-der-begegnung-das-bis-2012-in-der-waehringerstrasse-entsteht-m162544,28376.html>



Figure 3: Cecily Corti (middle), the restaurant manager (below) and VinziRast mittendrin inhabitants of the first hour (around)

<http://blogs.r.ftdata.co.uk/photo-diary/files/2013/05/Mittendrin.jpg>

All weblinks – where not explicitly stated – in this paper have been accessed in 09/2013.

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