

Article

The Changing Role of Student Housing as Social Infrastructure

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Abstract

The role of student housing within social infrastructure provision is arguably overlooked. This is a vital issue, as purpose-built student accommodation provides a significant stock of affordable accommodation for students in European university cities while also supporting their social integration in the urban environment. Although an increasing involvement of for-profit student home developers and providers has been diversifying the landscape of student housing across European university cities in the last decade, this change has been mainly associated with the internationalisation of students' mobility and the financialisation processes driven by private investors. Subsequently, this article expands these supply and demand side perspectives by localising student housing as social infrastructure. Using Vienna as a case study, the authors mapped purpose-built student accommodation locations and conducted qualitative interviews to analyse recent changes in the provision of student housing and to discuss its implications for the social dimension of purpose-built student accommodation. Accordingly, the respective analysis identifies different logics of student housing providers concerning expansion plans and housing quality, which, in turn, affect the function of student housing as social infrastructure. As a result, this article emphasises the need to critically reflect on the overlooked role of student housing as social infrastructure and the role of public actors as well as their policies in the financialisation of purpose-built student accommodation.

Keywords

policy-induced financialisation; purpose-built student accommodation; social infrastructure; student housing; student housing providers; Vienna

Issue

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1. Introduction

Student housing constitutes an important housing market segment for students moving into university cities to study. Students usually belong, income-wise, to a resource-limited resident group in need of immediate and temporary housing opportunities. While student housing includes diverse housing options such as private accommodation and shared flats, in this article, we focus on institutional student housing and the changing landscape of its provision. Student housing is available exclusively to students and is usually referred to as purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA; Kinton et al., 2018;

Reynolds, 2020). PBSA has traditionally been provided by welfare bodies or public actors. In recent years, new actors (including private operators and investors) have become active in providing student accommodation. For-profit (FP) actors that seem to follow a market-oriented logic became active in providing basic student apartments as well as luxury serviced apartments. Recently, this has been observed even in cities that are dominated by social housing policies such as Vienna (Rischaneck, 2018). There seems to be a clear shift in motivations to provide apartments to students between traditional non-profit (NP) providers and the new FP actors: from providing housing as a basic need to the provision

of an asset class for interested investors. In international academic debates on student housing, this has been reported as capital-driven development in this specific sector of the housing market, eventually resulting in higher rental prices (Glatter et al., 2014; Revington & August, 2020). For our article, we will focus on the potential implications of this shift for the role of housing as social infrastructure, which is potentially lost due to market-driven investment logic.

Debates broaching transitions of housing markets, in general, have become well-represented in academic discourses, also for the example of Vienna (for ongoing debates, see Aigner, 2020; Friesenecker & Kazepov, 2021; Gruber & Franz, 2019; Kadi et al., 2021; Kohlbacher & Reeger, 2020; Musil et al., 2022). However, discussions about eroding or missing social housing policies for institutional student housing and its implications for social infrastructure provision remain under-represented. This article will tackle the gap in discourse by extending the notion of PBSA with aspects of affordability and impacts on the social environment of students. Using student housing as a starting point for the public practice of social care allows us to think about social inclusion through finding a new home. We assume that everyday practices of students' social interactions usually take advantage of university facilities, i.e., libraries, sports facilities, or public spaces. These spaces are ideally located in proximity to university buildings and are built both for students and wider public purposes. Bearing these examples in mind, it becomes obvious that social infrastructure goes beyond facilities, its function for publicness, and questions of provisions. We claim to consider PBSA as social infrastructure where everyday practices and social life contributes to social care, even if everyday practices might take place more behind the scenes (see Latham & Layton, 2022; Layton & Latham, 2022). We aim to raise awareness of the overlooked role of PBSA as spaces of care and its effects on sustainable communities. Implications of contemporary practices of housing financialisation require even further attention in (post-)pandemic vulnerabilities (Enright & Ward, 2021).

The article will connect existing research on student housing and the financialisation of PBSA with debates on social infrastructure by asking two main research questions:

RQ1: To what extent can PBSA be understood as social infrastructure?

RQ2: How does the changing landscape of student housing provision challenge the understanding of PBSA as social infrastructure?

To answer these questions, we examine the changing landscape of PBSA provision in Vienna through the lenses of NP and FP student housing actors. In the Viennese context, the emergence of commercial student housing has been eased by policy decisions such

as the termination of public subsidies. This has led to a shift from student housing as a beneficiary housing type to a highly advertised market segment. The potential consequences for students as a vulnerable group (see Berglund-Snodgrass et al., 2021) remain under-researched, though. As Vienna is renowned internationally for inclusive social housing policies (Marquardt & Glaser, 2020) and an affordable local housing market contributing to social mix (Friesenecker & Kazepov, 2021), the exemplifying case of Vienna raises general awareness of shifting outcomes in social infrastructure provision, which might cause a decline in sociality and living quality at the local level.

Our results are based on a multi-method approach. First, we built an inventory of all student rental accommodation options in Vienna (with a total of 130 accommodation facilities) through online desktop research and observations. We collected details on the location, year of construction, type of provider, and price of rooms/apartments. This data was used for mapping the student housing landscape, which will be presented in Section 3. Second, between May 2020 and February 2021, we conducted nine qualitative, problem-centred, semi-structured interviews with (a) providers and operators of student accommodation in Vienna (both FP and NP providers) and (b) representatives of urban planning in the municipality of Vienna. The interviews were guided by themed and problem-centred questions. Data saturation was achieved on the knowledge of past, current, and future transformation processes in the Viennese student housing market. We conducted the interviews in person or through online calls (due to Covid-19 measures), which lasted approximately one hour on average and were transcribed afterwards. A single-case analysis enabled us to identify various narratives and analyse thematic codes that were pre-defined by the interview questions. The subsequent comparative analysis combines the content of the single interviews and compares narratives and arguments from each of the actor groups. The results of the interviews are presented in Section 4.

2. Theoretical Context: Student Housing and Its Interlinkages to Social Infrastructure

Studies on European student cities with off-campus student accommodation remain underrepresented throughout the literature, although we observe ongoing processes of studentification (see Revington, 2022, for an overview on recent debates) and changes in supply and demand (for the German context, see Glatter et al., 2014; for Spain, Garmendia et al., 2012; for Eastern Europe, Kowalke & Nowak, 2020). Minimal literature has been dedicated to PBSA in the European context, though this emerging sector has recently become more discussed (e.g., Kinton et al., 2018; Revington & August, 2020; Reynolds, 2020). As we will demonstrate in the following paragraphs, there is an obvious gap in research

concerning student housing and its role as a basic need within the provision of services of general interest and social infrastructure.

2.1. Purpose-Built Student Accommodation in the Realms of Services of General Interest and Social Infrastructure

Housing has always taken a special position within the idea of the welfare state: either considered an essential part or left out (see, e.g., Esping-Andersen, 1990; Harloe, 1995; Hicks & Kenworthy, 2003; Hoekstra, 2003; Kemeny, 2001; Torgersen, 1987). From the perspective of EU legislation, the provision of affordable housing is considered a central pillar of welfare (Humer et al., 2013). Welfare services are categorised as services of general interest that comprise universal access, meaning they should be accessible, but also affordable and available (Bjørnsen et al., 2015). Therefore, social or public housing, as well as institutional affordable housing can be considered part of the welfare state.

Especially in growing European cities, the consideration of housing as part of welfare and service provisions has been underlined in recent years (Pittini et al., 2019). Increasing challenges to housing affordability and accessibility are perceived as failures of public policy. Despite neoliberal austerity policies (Aalbers, 2019), an asset-based welfare regime that promotes real estate activities as complementary welfare of self-reliance is emerging (Ronald et al., 2017). The marketisation of social policies at global and national scales and the concept of the “right to housing” still exist, as do social housing policies aimed at providing housing as a public good (Colburn, 2019). In advanced economies across the EU, welfare provisions for social housing have endured, these are based on the goal (albeit limited) of realising affordable and adequate housing for their populations.

So far, only a few authors directly refer to student housing as a particular type of social infrastructure (Inderst, 2020; Levey et al., 2020). Based on the notion that cities are social spaces, we might consider every dimension of urban life as relevant to social infrastructure, which supports, creates, and maintains social life. The understanding of social infrastructure as “facilities utilized for public purposes” (Levey et al., 2020, p. 299) remains broad but serves as an entry point to argue for student housing as social infrastructure. Latham and Layton (2022, pp. 660) expand the notion of social infrastructure even further by adding four dimensions including people as infrastructure, sociality, social care, and social life. While facilitating sociality represents the main characteristic, “social infrastructure refers to the networks of spaces, facilities, institutions, and groups that create affordances for social connection” (Latham & Layton, 2019, p. 3). Social infrastructure goes beyond facilities, its function for publicness, and questions of provisions. The risk of losing sociality in sustainable communities will be explained in the following sections.

2.2. Current Transitions in the Purpose-Built Student Accommodation Sector in the Context of Student’s Diversifying Housing Demands

Student housing is an important residential market segment, traditionally providing affordable accommodation for students. Nevertheless, provision differs significantly across countries and welfare states. Depending on the national and local context, student housing provision in European university cities ranges from a combination of NP, charitable, and benevolent landlords, providing accommodation options developed within historical social-welfare ideologies, to PBSA in neoliberal and financialised housing contexts (Glatter et al., 2014; Reynolds, 2020). Throughout the last decade, the landscape of student housing providers has become increasingly diversified due to the growing involvement of commercial accommodation developers in many European countries (see Miessner, 2021; Musil, 2019; Reynolds, 2020). Even in countries with a history of social-welfare-oriented, NP housing provision (e.g., Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK), new types of student accommodation are emerging across different price segments. New actors in student housing provision usually offer various amenities under one roof and contribute to a lifestyle-oriented student environment, including a central location or accommodation that is situated near university buildings, high-standard interiors, broadband internet, and security surveillance, as well as leisure amenities (e.g., gym facilities, roof-top terraces, cleaning services, etc.). These new types of PBSA are seen as a product of changing preferences in the student sector, contrasting with traditional student accommodation.

In general, students are the sole customers of PBSA. They are characterised as a social group defined around their mutual occupation. Traditionally, students are also considered a vulnerable group, due to being in education and being not or only slightly active in the labour market. The particular vulnerability lies in their limitation of resources in the housing market: Students require accommodation at a particular time (period of study), at a specific location (proximity to higher-education institutions), and with specific facilities (e.g., broadband internet, study rooms). Further, affordability often restrains their options (see La Roche et al., 2010). However, socio-economic characteristics and the resources available to students vary greatly and the full spectrum of potential financial means should be considered (Reynolds, 2020), which is also a reason why students represent a specific target group in current housing market studies (Hubbard, 2009). The diverse subgroups of students include, for example, national and international students, as well as students from different origins (see King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Schnitzer & Zempel-Gino, 2002). National students moving to another university city may utilise their cultural knowledge, local networks, and family support, especially when it comes to finding accommodation. International students usually lack social and cultural

capital, and their financial resources tend to be more limited (Fang & van Liempt, 2020, p. 2).

The driving force for the wider variety of student accommodation provisions can be found in a general increase in student numbers and the international mobility of students. Increasing demand for student accommodation in university cities seems to motivate new actors to invest in new student housing, seeing it as a promising business model. The increase in students, or “the massification of higher education” (Reynolds, 2020, p. 2), is one of the main drivers in most student cities, although its implications in cities across Europe vary. Today, studying at a university has become more fluid, in the sense that short-term international experiences are more common and have become a requirement for academic and corporate careers. Transnational mobility programmes have been integral components of EU higher education since the European university reform (the Bologna Process) was signed in 1999. In addition to the harmonisation of study programmes across the EU, the European Erasmus mobility programme has also promoted internationalisation (see King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003).

Current housing transitions are further explained by the profit-seeking in temporary housing (Debrunner & Gerber, 2021) and the financialisation of the student housing sector (Revington & August, 2020). According to Aalbers (2016, p. 2), financialisation is defined as the increasing dominance of financial actors, markets, practices, measurements, and narratives, which leads to a transformation of economies, firms, states, and households. The financialisation of housing is related to an over-accumulation of capital in need of new avenues for profitable investment (Aalbers, 2016). Further, the transformation of student housing can be termed “assetisation” (Ward & Swyngedouw, 2018), referring to the search for new fields of investment, even within certain markets (Fiorentino et al., 2020). As such, accommodation targeting particular “social types of housing,” such as student housing or senior housing, has become a “social infrastructure asset” (Inderst, 2020, p. 4). Since students often tend to be newcomers to the local housing market, they could be at risk of housing exclusion without social-centred considerations that include affordability instead of profit-making. To conclude, student accommodation represents an important basic need but is a contested housing submarket in the context of financialisation.

3. The Changing Landscape of Vienna’s Student Housing Provision

Vienna has a long-established ideology of social inclusiveness through the provision of decent, affordable housing. The so-called period of the “Red Vienna,” referring to its long-standing socialist city administration, is renowned as the origin of inclusive social housing policies, tenant protection, and restricted local housing market (see, e.g., Kadi, 2015). Also, for the provision of PBSA, we

find traditional structures within the city. As our desk-top research and interview data highlights, NP providers have historically catered to the accommodation needs of students. Private providers have only entered the market over the last decade. Properties of commercial or FP providers tend to be highly visible due to a prominent style of architecture characterised by state-of-the-art aesthetics or high-rise buildings, as well as effective advertising campaigns in the press and media (Rischanek, 2018; “Studierende wohnen teuer,” 2018).

The number of students moving to Vienna has been growing continuously. In 2020, around 200,000 students studied and lived in Vienna, accounting for about 10% of the total population (Landesstatistik Wien, 2020). According to the Student Social Survey (see Unger et al., 2020), only a minority of all students in Vienna (approximately 10%) live in PBSA, reflecting a general pattern seen across Austrian university cities (Unger et al., 2020). In 2019, only 11% of all students in Austria lived in PBSA, while the majority lived in private households (of which 25% lived in shared flats, 28% in a flat with their partner, 16% in single households, and 20% with their parents or other relatives; Unger et al., 2020). Compared to other European countries, the share of students in PBSA is relatively low in Austria overall, but the number living in PBSA has been rising since 2015 (Unger et al., 2020). Research indicates that living arrangements correlate strongly with the age of students, as well as with the socio-economic situation of their parents. According to Unger et al. (2020), students tend to live in PBSA at a younger age. Furthermore, student housing in Austria is more attractive to international students: 24% of students who gained their formal education outside of Austria live in student accommodation.

3.1. Localising Purpose-Built-Student Accommodation in Vienna

The placement of student accommodation within the city correlates with university locations (see Figure 1; note, that only the main university buildings were included on the map). University departments in Vienna are primarily located in central areas of the city. Therefore, traditional PBSA is usually located in direct proximity to the inner districts of the city. This creates visibility of social infrastructure in the inner-city built environment. Nevertheless, university buildings (including offices, libraries, lecture halls, and department buildings) are also situated in peripheral locations. In the last decades, developments regarding universities were part of urban development processes, as in the case of the new campus of the Vienna University of Economics that moved to an urban development area along an extended metro line during the early 2000s.

The diffusion of university departments to new locations across the city has had and will continue to have implications for past and future locations of student accommodation. In recent years, developers have

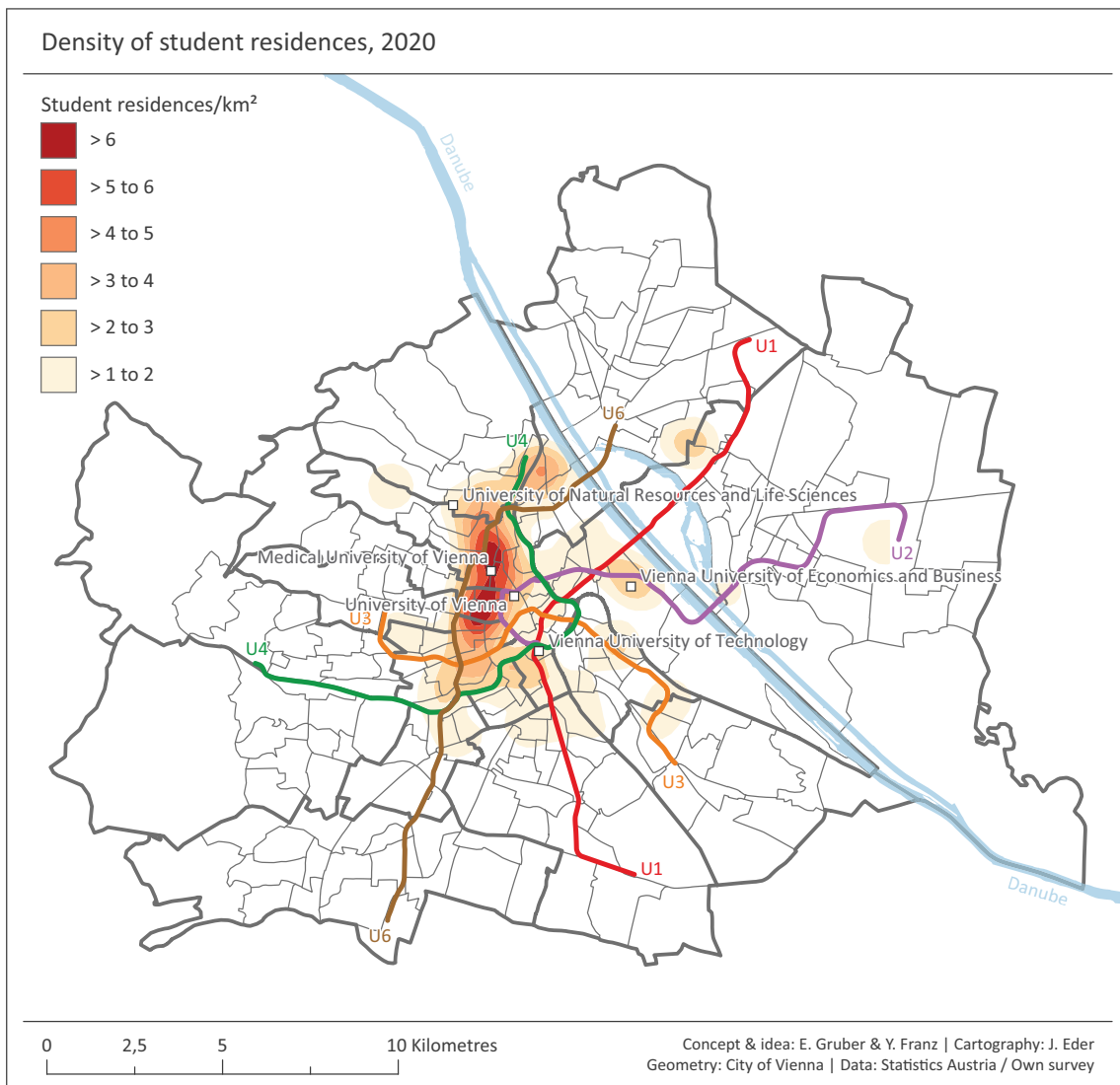


Figure 1. Localising student accommodation in Vienna: Density map (student residences per km², 2020).

realised several new-built projects outside the city centre. Some are in proximity to new university locations, for example, in Krieau, which is close to the new campus of the Vienna University of Economics and Business, or in Donauefeld, in the north-eastern part of the city, between the metro lines U1 and U6, near the Vienna University of Veterinary Medicine. New-built student housing can also be found in urban development sites without any university facilities, such as the Seestadt Aspern, at the final stop of metro line U2, or the Sonnwendviertel, along metro line U1. These areas are representative of the essential role of students in the local economy (Musil & Eder, 2013). From mapping, we can confirm that PBSA has become an important implementation tool in current urban development projects in Vienna.

3.2. Traditional and New Student Housing Providers

Our inventory includes 130 accommodation facilities in total and identifies that most student housing develop-

ers fall under the category of NP providers. Typically, these providers historically originated as charitable associations or societies. As actors within the landscape of social infrastructure provision, NP providers were traditionally able to receive public funding for construction and maintenance costs. The largest provider of student accommodation (by the number of dwellings) in Vienna is the Akademikerhilfe (Academic Aid), followed by the Gemeinnützige Studentenwohnbau AG (Non-Profit Student Housing) and the Österreichische Jungarbeiterbewegung (Austrian Young Workers' Movement). The Akademikerhilfe is the longest-standing provider of student accommodation in Vienna, founded in 1921 as a spiritual guidance and welfare institution for students, organised by a Catholic-civic community. The Österreichische Jungarbeiterbewegung, founded in 1946, was organised to house young workers and apprentices. By the 1950s and 1960s, their target group was expanded to include students. Since 2013, several new student accommodation facilities have been built

by private investors and developers. These are further maintained by FP providers, such as Milestone (originating in 2013 as a Vienna-based provider), the Fizz (since 2017 in Vienna, provided by the UK-based developer Stonehill), Linked Living (since 2015 in Vienna, provided by the Luxembourgian developer Corestate), and the Studenthotel (the Dutch development group realised their housing project in 2020). By the end of 2020, around 10 larger commercial investors were active in Vienna, with more expected to join the market soon (e.g., the US-based development group Greystar). Finally, there are those NP actors that have entered the student housing market in recent years with free-financed developments.

While NP providers have increased the availability of student dwellings throughout the past decades, the share of FP providers has expanded rapidly recently (see Figure 2). Since 2015, around 4,000 apartments in new-built student accommodation facilities have been realised, approximately 1,300 of which are run by FP providers. By the end of 2020, there were a total of around 21,000 apartments.

On average, students spend €440 per month on housing in Austria (Unger et al., 2020). Those living in PBSA report monthly costs of €362 on average in Austria (and €382 in Vienna; Unger et al., 2020). Living in a shared flat is only slightly more expensive (€380), while students in other private households (single households or with a partner) pay around €500 per month. Living costs have been rising for all types of accommodation in recent years. The highest increase was in private accommodation, but the cost of PBSA has also increased by 16%, although Vienna displayed the lowest increase in rent in comparison with other university cities (Unger et al., 2020).

According to different providers we interviewed, PBSA in general differs in price, quality, and further loca-

tion and size of the buildings. However, we find general changes not only by provider type but by the year of the erection. When calculating the average of the cheapest available apartment type, a room at an NP apartment costs around €300, while at an FP PBSA it was €610 by mid-2021. On average, 160 students are hosted per accommodation facility. The largest capacity of 633 rooms can be found in a recently built FP PBSA. Smaller PBSA with less than 10 rooms also exist. Especially newly built student FP accommodation tends to include a larger number of rooms. This might be a sign of an increasing need for profit maximisation, but also of continuously increasing building-land prices. In terms of amenities (e.g., community rooms, rooftop terraces, laundry rooms, party rooms, as well as an internet connection) the differences are less obvious between NP and FP PBSA. However, the most essential differences between FP and NP providers are the room types and their design, which are often related to the year of construction. FP providers mostly only offer single or self-contained apartments and larger average room sizes. Shared rooms (or apartments with shared bathrooms or kitchens) still exist in most facilities offered by NP student accommodation providers. Newly built or newly renovated NP accommodation, however, similarly also offer only single occupancy apartments.

4. The Ideology of Student Housing as Social Infrastructure

Based on qualitative interviews, we analysed the motivations and underlying ideologies of student housing providers. We identify two main arguments which differ between FP and NP providers. The first argument includes assumptions on the future of student housing provision in Vienna in comparison to other university cities in Austria and Europe. This helps to understand

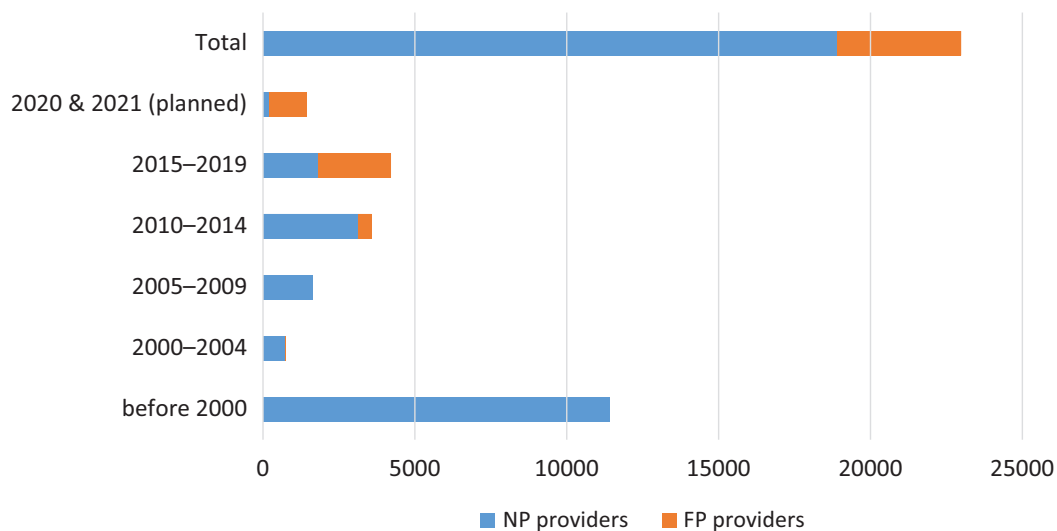


Figure 2. Student housing stock of rooms available in Vienna by provider, categorised by year of opening and in total. Source: Authors' work based on data collected via desk-top research, as of February 2021.

the reasons for expansions and future expansion plans of student housing providers. The second argument includes insights into the provision of facilities, the housing quality, and further criteria which support or hinder the understanding of student housing as social infrastructure.

4.1. Student Housing in Vienna: Recent Developments and Expansion Plans

As already observed during our data collection, we were able to follow an increased building activity of student accommodation in Vienna from 2005 onwards. In our interviews it was reported by two NP providers (NP1, NP2) that there was a shortage in student accommodation, which had developed throughout the 1990s, resulting in lengthy waiting lists for students seeking accommodation in the city. Subsidies by the national government for the renovation and erection were exclusively available for non-profit associations, but were withdrawn back then. In the direct aftermath of this decision, NP student housing providers had to close down certain locations and raise prices for accommodation (Aigner, 2011; Tempfer, 2011). FP providers have entered the Viennese student housing market since 2010 under conditions where NP PBSA existed solely and often had rather low-quality and run-down apartments (interview with FP1). Since 2015, the majority of new-built PBSA has been developed by FP providers, and further new apartments are expected over the coming years (see Figure 3). Also, NP providers have in the last years added new student accommodations. As Figure 1 in Section 3.1 shows, locations of new PBSA are increasingly detached from central university locations, which is on the one hand

due to new campus and university buildings spreading over the city. On the other hand, few central locations can also be explained by rising building land prices and decreasing possibilities to realise projects. Institutional housing can further be realised in various zoning categories, which leads to the result that student housing can be constructed on building land, which is not appropriate for apartments foreseen for permanent housing.

While all interviewees from the group of FP providers mentioned the potential for expansion and even expressed plans for developing new student accommodation, all interviewees from the NP group found the market to be rather saturated. Most NP providers (NP1, NP3) reported that their current focus is rather on renovating existing locations and improving qualities and standards rather than expanding to new locations. Traditional NP student accommodation providers have been operating for decades or longer and reported on saturation in demand for student housing. Waiting lists rarely exist, and where they do, this tends only to be for specific, particularly desirable locations. NP interviewees expect the student housing market to stabilise from the recent state of expansion to a somewhat more consolidated market, with a few of the current student housing providers dropping out, for example, through mergers or sell-offs. Furthermore, there are expectations that certain providers would employ diversification strategies, thus changing their concept over time (NP2). For instance, rather than developing accommodation for students only, other temporary housing options are expected to be made available to non-student target groups. The Covid-19 pandemic might also have a bearing on this, in that the pandemic has heavily influenced the demand for student housing, with many students



Figure 3. Student accommodation under development and a high-rise building promoted as the tallest student apartment building by an FP investor in Vienna. Source: Photograph taken by Elisabeth Gruber, 2021.

moving back to their parent's homes or home locations to engage in distance learning.

FP investors not only differ from NP actors in future expansion plans, but also in their ideology of provision. NP providers in our interviews often highlighted their responsibility in providing home and shelter for students and often referred to their history, either in social housing or in institutional housing (NP1, NP3). FP providers on the other hand reported on their market entrance winding the chance for a stable demand and thus a lucrative return, often contracted by investors (FP2). While they might relate to providing "a good product" to ensure customer satisfaction, they also hinted at the logic of profit maximisation behind this objective. In contrast, NP providers (especially those with a long and traditional background) primarily built their role in student housing provision as a social commitment. They show commitment in terms of providing affordable housing, rather than materialising an investment opportunity. As such, NP providers represent important actors in social infrastructure provision. However, it remains difficult to distinguish clearly between NP and FP providers. Among our interviewees, we identified commercial providers who also had a background in NP student housing provision in countries other than Austria, and who still consider affordable student housing provision their main purpose (FP3). Furthermore, some NP providers explicitly stated their intention of increasing market share (NP2). Overall, we found a variety of concepts among student housing projects developed and operated by FP and NP providers. General visions on the contribution to public welfare and strategies on the business model differ considerably between FP and NP providers.

4.2. Understanding Student Housing as Social Infrastructure

PBSA represents a type of accommodation that mainly attracts first-semester students, especially those without knowledge of local housing markets or networks in the respective city. This we can learn from conducted surveys (Unger et al., 2020) and has also been confirmed by our interview partners. Especially NP providers have underlined their role in accommodating newcomers in the city: One NP provider reported on their responsibility for the "onboarding process" of students in their new "home city" (NP3). Another mentioned the role of PBSA as the main foundation for socialisation in the city and as a first-hand community, which underlines the role of PBSA as a facilitator for sociality (Levey et al., 2020) within social infrastructure provision (NP1). Also, the creation of a community in the student accommodation was mentioned more explicitly by NP providers, who referred to organised activities and their role as "caretakers" in the social sense (NP2).

The level of importance attributed to the "sense of community" differed among the interview partners representing FP providers or developers. For example, one

FP developer underlined their disinterest in the provision of community rooms within student accommodation as those remain relatively unused and yet require constant maintenance, as students tend not to take care of these facilities or to pay attention to keeping them clean and tidy (FP2). Another FP interviewee (FP3) referred to the fact that it is more cost-efficient to refrain from providing community spaces, resulting in lower-priced apartments for students. Yet, other FP providers did mention the importance of the community aspect in the interviews, also referring to high-quality community rooms as a special amenity (FP1).

The contemporary provision of PBSA in Vienna responds to changing lifestyles and living demands of current-day students. Almost all interviewees highlighted a growing demand for more privacy, as reflected in the greater demand for single rooms. Whereas shared bathrooms and kitchens once represented the norm in most student accommodations, single apartments with their own bathrooms and cooking facilities are the preference of most students, today. Nevertheless, the variety of different types of living arrangements in the PBSA sector reflects the heterogeneity of students with their spectrum of budgets. Our interview partners confirmed that students from different backgrounds are attracted to different housing styles and that the diversified landscape of student-home providers and student-housing options usually caters to the needs of the various types of students.

Despite the great diversity of students' demands, certain aspects of student accommodation prove universally desirable, according to all interviewees. These include (a) a central location or proximity to a university, (b) a reasonable price, (c) good maintenance, and (d) a pleasing visual appearance. Interviewees defined a "good location" not only as a central site within the inner city but also as a location with highly rated public transport connections and/or outdoor recreation spaces nearby. Quality requirements for accommodation have increased across the board, as was confirmed by all interviewees. Quality was defined concerning the design and appearance of furniture, general cleanliness, and infrastructure provision, such as high-speed internet. NP actors reported that the entrance of FP providers also set new standards in quality, which made it necessary for them to catch up on certain aspects (e.g., fast internet connection, new furniture, but also advertising and marketing activities) to remain visible and in demand. Therefore, the appearance of new student home providers on the student housing market in Vienna was reported to have put pressure to improve quality standards in all PBSA. In recent years, ongoing renovation of the housing stock has been underway (see the example in Figure 4). In general, the arrival of FP providers on the student housing market was considered to have produced a more volatile market, as well as a wider variety of provisions and increased housing quality. Further, it has been reported how the market that was once pressured



Figure 4. Traditional centrally located NP student accommodation from the 1970s under renovation. Source: Photograph taken by Elisabeth Gruber, 2021.

and requested (e.g., waiting lists to receive a place in a PBSA) is now more accessible, which makes it easier for students in search of accommodation, but more competitive for the providers.

Besides higher living standards and the demand for greater privacy, all interviewees agreed that fluctuations in students living in PBSA have increased. Traditional NP providers, who were able to observe the student housing market already for a long time referred to a decrease in the average duration of the tenancy, from between four or five years a decade ago, to just two years today. This might be related to a higher number of international students who often stay in their “host” country for just one or two semesters, as well as a growing number of students that are changing university locations between their bachelor’s and master’s studies. Today’s students are more mobile and frequently on the move, partially due to the European university reform of 1999 (the Bologna Process; see European Commission, 2021), which stimulates higher mobility during and between undergraduate and graduate studies. All student housing providers interviewed for this research reported on the increasing number of international students now in the student housing market. There were no obvious differences between FP and NP providers about this assumption, although shares of international students were reported a bit higher in FP PBSA. A high fluctuation in numbers challenges the operation of student accommodation, as our interviewees mentioned. Additional renovation and maintenance are needed in the context of a high frequency of renter turnover, as well as more extensive efforts in building up a community within any given student accommodation facility. The internationalisation of study programmes further accelerated the

anyway increasing diversity on the demand side of student housing.

5. Discussion: The Changing Role of Student Housing as Social Infrastructure

This article aims to close the gap in academic literature to locate student housing in social infrastructure discourses. Using Vienna as a case study, we shed light on the ongoing financialisation process of the local student housing (sub)market which includes an increase of private FP housing developers. In our article, we have argued why institutional student housing can be defined as part of the social infrastructure of urban agglomerations. The further aim of the article was to find out to what extent current changes observed in the city of Vienna have implications for student housing as social infrastructure.

In recent years, a large amount of newly built student accommodation has been provided by FP actors. In the press and media, as well as academic debates, the new actors have been received as actors with sole market interests providing “luxury student apartments” (Rischaneck, 2018; “Studierende wohnen teuer,” 2018). However, the complete picture of the changing landscape in student housing is more differentiated. On the one hand, it can be argued how institutional student housing transforms from a basic need into a part of the financialised housing market, driven by international actors and their investment interests (Ward & Swyngedouw, 2018). On the other hand, the presence of FP providers has also led to a more diverse supply of student housing, which can be framed as necessary transformation in the context of increasing mobility amongst international students in higher education (King

& Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Reynolds, 2020). There is better availability and accessibility due to the general increase of PBSA and the broad (international) marketing of available rooms. Further, the rising quality of student accommodation in the city can be rated as a positive implication for the development of social infrastructure in the city. Drawing from the Viennese case, we cannot confirm that international students are more limited in financial means compared to national students. Rather, our data hints at a range of students with very different resources and needs. Certain international students seem to demand a particular housing quality including a broader range of facilities. We conclude that especially international students benefit from a more diverse and available student housing market.

While the variety of concepts provided by the amplified range of actors can be a positive development, we see a certain risk of disregarding the social dimension of PBSA. Through ongoing privatisation and financialisation in the student housing market segment, the already overlooked social aspects of PBSA potentially are even more under threat. Our results show that price segments differ according to the type of provider, which again has implications for accessibility. FP providers depend, to a higher degree, on maximising their revenue due to the nature of their relationship with their investors. For FP providers, the quality of housing seems more integral to ultimately having a good product to sell. This aspect highlights the rationale for marketising housing as a lifestyle product and reflects practices of housing commodification (Aalbers, 2016; Fiorentino et al., 2020; Kadi, 2015). Facilities supporting spaces of everyday social interaction within and beyond the student rooms are cost intensive as they require physical space and regular maintenance. Consequently, the provision of those spaces has been reported to become rare in PBSA provided by FP student housing, putting at risk the sociality of student housing as social infrastructure (Latham & Layton, 2022) within sustainable communities.

In our analysis, we witnessed what has been termed a “predatory competition” between NP and FP providers. Some actors anticipate changes in business strategies among student housing providers (e.g., provision of temporal housing to other groups than students) in the future. Also, market exits are expected. Both aspects represent a potential threat to the provision of student accommodation in the future. Commercial FP providers, who greatly depend on investment expectations and market forces, might particularly be under threat, especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. We have further recognised how institutional housing is seemingly excluded from social housing policy. This might eventually affect student housing as a sub-housing market and its role as social infrastructure. There is evidence that wider effects on sustainable communities are overlooked and threatened, as private market interest in urban development has been accelerated by cuts in public subsidies for NP operators.

6. Conclusion

This article closes the gap in academic literature regarding student housing as part of social infrastructure provision by analysing current shifts in PBSA provision in Vienna. We show that student housing goes beyond its accommodation function. It represents a central contact point that enables sociality and social connection for newly arriving students in the city (Latham & Layton, 2019). New-built PBSA in newly built urban development areas calls for a careful assessment of the fulfilment of social dimensions. Here, public actors and planners hold a particular role as it requires new forms of communication between public and private actors to secure the social dimension of student housing in social infrastructure provision. To understand the various facets and implications of student housing as social infrastructure, a profound understanding of everyday life, social interactions, and social sustainability within the wider community is needed.

Our article suggests the integration of student housing in the discourses of social infrastructure provision (Inderst, 2020) and provides a stronger position for PBSA in the realms of social infrastructure debates. This might allow a better understanding of overlooked impacts of the ongoing financialisation of student housing. It also ensures more nuanced reflections on the role of local public actors and policymaking as the loss of the social dimension within student housing might not only be triggered by global capital investment but also influenced by policy shifts (Aigner, 2020; Kadi et al., 2021). Comparative research including the perspectives of other European cities would yield further insight into the converging of processes in the context of the internationalisation of higher education as well as the financialisation of student housing. Further research is needed for the timely identification of contemporary dynamics in the supply of PBSA and its impact on social infrastructure provision. Not only Vienna, known as the “city of social housing,” but other cities with an affordable student housing stock are at risk of losing their attractiveness as university cities through policy-induced commodification of student housing.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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