

Squatting in Austria

Part 0. Transdisciplinary Foundations

0.1 An Object That Belongs to No Discipline

Squatting is not a topic for which a single discipline is responsible. It is a breach of law, a form of dwelling, a social movement, a media event, a planning conflict and an object of memory, and each of these descriptions is entirely correct and by itself insufficient. The legal view explains what is permissible but not why an administration refrains from enforcement. The economic view explains why a building stands empty but not why people occupy it. Movement research explains the actors but not the price formation against which they act. Media analysis explains the interpretation but not the event.

Transdisciplinarity is therefore not a methodological ornament here but a necessity arising from the object. It differs from interdisciplinarity in that several fields do not treat the same object in sequence; rather, a common question is formulated against which each discipline must let its contribution be measured. The common question of this book is: under what conditions do existing, legally allocated and actually accessible space diverge, and what follows from that.

The question is deliberately formulated so as to be operationalisable in each participating discipline. Existing space is a matter of building and stock statistics. Allocated space is a legal quantity: ownership, tenancy, zoning, allocation. Accessible space is an economic and social quantity: price, contract availability, discrimination, capital requirements. The occupation is the observable indicator that the three quantities have diverged and that no institutional mediation is taking hold.

The structure of the whole work follows from this design. The main volume reconstructs the Austrian case history, the continuation volume tests the guiding question against present-day data, and the following sections of this part disclose which theoretical references are used and where their limits lie.

0.2 Urban Sociology and Movement Research

Movement research supplies three usable instruments for this object. The first is the concept of the repertoire of action: movements dispose of a limited number of learned forms of action which they select according to situation and which shift historically. Occupation, demonstration, blockade, campaign and acquisition are elements of such a repertoire, and the transition from appropriation to purchase described in this book is a shift of repertoire, not a change of conviction.

The second instrument is the typology of squatting. Comparative research distinguishes occupations by purpose: from deprivation, as an alternative housing strategy, as a preservation

action against demolition, as entrepreneurial appropriation of spaces for culture and trade, and as political-symbolic action. These types have different conditions of success and different outcomes. The Austrian case is instructive because in fifty years it has passed through almost all of them: preservation-oriented at the Spittelberg, entrepreneurial at the Arena and the WUK, alternative-residential at the Aegidi/Spalo, political-symbolic since the 2010s. Institutionalisation succeeded most readily where the purpose of the occupation corresponded to an existing administrative competence — culture could be funded, housing could not.

The third instrument is the analysis of urban movements as bearers of claims to use value against exchange value. In this perspective movements defend the use of a space against its commercial realisation, and they do so by means lying outside established procedures, because those procedures presuppose realisation. The claim to participate in deciding the conditions of urban life has been formulated in the literature as the right to the city and recurs in almost every Austrian occupation declaration, usually without knowledge of the formula's origin.

The limit of these approaches lies in their proximity to the object. Movement research frequently arises in cooperation with movements and adopts their self-description. This book therefore uses movement sources systematically as interested testimony rather than as factual accounts — with the same reservation that applies to official sources.

0.3 Housing Economics

Three concepts carry the economic side.

The first is the rent gap. A building in a location capable of upgrading yields less under its present use than it could under its highest and best use. As long as this gap is small, the stock remains as it is. Once it exceeds a threshold, conversion becomes economically compelling, and with it arises pressure to terminate existing uses. Both the vacancy of the 1970s and the tenant-removal conflicts of the 2010s can thereby be described as the same phenomenon in different market conditions: in the first case demolition paid, in the second refurbishment with re-letting.

The second concept is the distinction between unitary and dualist rental markets. In a unitary market a large limited-profit or municipal sector competes directly with the private one and dampens its prices; in a dualist market a small, means-tested sector serves the poorest while the rest remains unregulated. In this literature Austria counts as a model case of the unitary type. Two findings of this book follow from that: the comparatively small size of the squatting movement, because the majority was provided for, and today's division of the market, because the dampening effect operates only where the subsidised sector actually supplies dwellings — and its new construction fell in 2025 to the lowest level since the turn of the millennium.

The third concept is the financialisation of housing: the treatment of housing primarily as an investment asset whose yield is compared with capital market alternatives. It explains why vacancy can be rational, why interest rate changes feed directly into construction activity and prices, and why a policy addressing only rents does not enlarge supply.

The limit of the economic approaches lies in the data. Rent gaps are not directly measurable, vacancy is not surveyed in Austria, and the supply side is accessible only through platform data with known biases. Where this book argues economically, the data basis is therefore named in each case.

0.4 Law and the Sociology of Law

In legal terms the case is simple; in the sociology of law it is not.

The legal basis is ownership as a comprehensive right of control that expressly includes the right not to use a thing. The sociology of law, by contrast, describes ownership as a bundle of individual entitlements — to use, to exclude, to alienate, to alter — which can be politically tailored in different ways. Tenant protection, zoning law, heritage protection and vacancy levies are interventions in individual elements of the bundle, not attacks on ownership as such. This perspective makes visible that the question is not whether ownership is limited but which element is limited and how strongly. Austria limits price formation in the existing stock considerably and non-use hardly at all.

The second finding from the sociology of law is the enforcement gap. A norm takes effect not through its existence but through its application. The constitutional amendment of 2024 made the vacancy levy legally possible; in several provinces enforcement has remained a mere empowerment of municipalities, and Vienna abstains. The gap between norm and enforcement is itself a political decision, presented, however, as a technical problem — with the argument that the data situation is unclear while no survey is conducted.

The third finding concerns the asymmetry of initiative. Austrian possession law presupposes an application by the entitled party. The actual duration of an occupation therefore depends not on the law but on the owner's interest — and, in the case of public owners, on a political judgement. It is precisely this construction that explains how the same legal position could in Vienna produce fifteen years of toleration and handover and thereafter evictions, without a single norm having changed.

0.5 Media, Interpretation and Memory

Three concepts frame the interpretive level.

The first is framing. Events are not reported but placed in interpretive frames that determine what appears as cause, what as problem, and who as acting. Whether an occupation is framed as a breach of law, as an emergency or as a protest decides the political viability of the demand, and the choice of frame is itself contested.

The second is moral panic. It describes a mechanism in which a deviant group becomes the symbol of a general threat, its features are amplified in representation, and the response exceeds the original deviance in intensity. Coverage of the autonomous centres of the 1980s fits this pattern: drug use and neglect became explanations for a conflict whose core was the question of housing and space.

The third is memory politics. What is remembered in exhibitions, anniversaries and films follows a selection that favours successes. The canonisation of the Arena as a founding event and the slight presence of the 1988 clearance in municipal memory are not coincidences but results of that selection. Musealisation secures knowledge and simultaneously ends the claim: what is exhibited counts as past.

0.6 Method of This Work

Five rules follow from the preceding sections and apply throughout the work.

First, triangulation: every central statement rests on at least two independent types of source, ideally an official statistic, a legal source and an account by those involved. Where only one source exists, this is noted in the text.

Second, obligation to define: figures are used only together with their basis of collection. This applies in particular to vacancy, where three circulating values are three definitions and not three measurements, and to rent, where existing stock and asking prices have different populations.

Third, examination of interest: movement, official, association and media sources are treated equally as interested. The test is not whether a source is partisan but in which direction and with what loss of insight.

Fourth, disclosure of gaps: missing data are named and not replaced by plausible assumptions. For the years 1975 to 1995 no full survey of occupations exists; for vacancy no nationwide survey exists to this day. Both gaps are findings, not marginal notes.

Fifth, testability of the guiding thesis: the thesis of the divergence of three spatial quantities is formulated so that it can fail. It would be refuted if, in a phase of widely diverging quantities, no attempts at appropriation occurred, or if occupations were frequent in phases of close correspondence. The continuation volume tests it against the data of 2026 and records where the test fails for want of data.

Literature and sources for Part 0

Urban and movement theory Lefebvre, Henri: *Le droit à la ville*. Paris 1968. — Harvey, David: *Rebel Cities. From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. London 2012. — Castells, Manuel: *The City and the Grassroots*. Berkeley 1983. — Pruijt, Hans: *The Logic of Urban Squatting*. In: *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 2013. — Martínez, Miguel A. (ed.): *works on comparative squatting research in Europe*. — Foltin, Robert: *Und wir bewegen uns doch*. Vienna 2004, new edition 2026.

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Financialization of Housing. London 2016. — Association of Limited-Profit Housing Developers, Statistics Austria and the OeNB for the Austrian data.

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Media and memory Cohen, Stanley: *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. London 1972. — Entman, Robert M.: *Framing. Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm*. 1993. — Wien Museum (ed.): *Besetzt! Kampf um Freiräume seit den 70ern*. Vienna 2012.

Note: the theoretical references of this part are applied in the course of the work but not cited explicitly throughout. Where a statement rests directly on one of the concepts named, this is indicated in the relevant chapter.