THE BUILDINGS STAND, THE QUESTION STANDS TOO

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There is a comfortable way of talking about squatted buildings. You list the years — 1975 Amerlinghaus, 1976 Arena, 1981 WUK, 1982 Villa — call them milestones, and the subject is closed, because it all turned out fine. The buildings are still there, after all. They are in better shape than ever: the WUK was fully refurbished between 2021 and 2024, the city put 22.38 million euros into it, there are lifts, ramps, accessible toilets and a lease instead of the decades-long loan on sufferance, under which the city could have said “out” at any moment.

That is a good ending, and it is an ending. What nobody managed in fifty years, the administration settled: the conflict became a contractual relationship. You can celebrate that, and while doing so you should not forget what the whole thing was once directed against.

The numbers that matter now

In 2025, construction of 31,979 dwellings in new buildings was authorised in Austria. That is the lowest figure since this survey began in 2010, and roughly 40 per cent below 2015. The limited-profit sector, the part of the market that still dampens prices at all, reported 11,920 completions in 2025, the lowest level since the turn of the millennium and a decline of 13 per cent. For 2026 it expects even fewer.

At the same time the average gross rent in the existing stock stood at 10.5 euros per square metre at the start of 2026. Sounds manageable. But anyone looking for a flat does not pay the stock average, they pay the asking price, and in the first quarter of 2026 the median asking rent was around 16 euros per square metre, eight per cent above the previous year. Between what housing costs and what looking for housing costs lies a factor of one and a half. Since 2010, rents in Austria have risen by more than 70 per cent, private rents by around 80. Across the euro area the figure was 23.5.

That is the actual news: there is no housing market in this country. There are two. One for those who are in, and one for those who want in. Anyone who signed a contract in 2012 lives in a different Austria from someone who has to sign in 2026.

The vacancy nobody counts

The oldest sentence in the movement runs: there is enough standing empty. To this day it has been neither refuted nor proven, for one single reason — nobody counts.

The cautious estimates speak of around 230,000 vacant dwellings nationwide. The analysis of the population register arrives at 653,028 dwellings with no registered occupant, with rates from 14.7 per cent in Styria down to 9.7 per cent in Vienna. That second figure is not a vacancy count; it includes secondary residences, holiday flats, short-term letting, estates in probate. But it is the upper bound of what would theoretically be available, and nobody knows where within that range the truth lies.

Legally the matter has been settled since April 2024: the National Council amended the constitution, and the provinces may levy vacancy charges. What has happened since can be summarised briefly. Tyrol converted the obligation on its municipalities into a mere authorisation at the start of 2026. In Salzburg, as of March 2026, 45 of 119 municipalities levy anything at all. In Tyrol, around 900 vacancies were reported for the entire province in 2025, while experts assume a multiple of that. Carinthia is discussing. Vienna refuses; the mayor considers vacancy hard to prove, the secondary-residence charge already adopted is on ice, and the city itself has a four-figure number of unallocated municipal flats.

The justification for doing nothing runs: the data situation is unclear. The data situation is unclear because nothing is collected. That is not an administrative problem, it is a decision.

What politics actually did

Not nothing. Since 1 January 2026 a rent package applies: reference-value and category rents may rise by at most one per cent in 2026, two per cent in 2027, and from 2028 the rule is three per cent plus half of anything above that. Increases are permitted only once a year and no earlier than April, whatever the contract says. For the first time, free-market rents were capped as well. Fixed terms with commercial landlords must run for at least five years. And Vienna has capped tourist short-term letting at 90 days a year since July 2024, with penalties of up to 50,000 euros per flat; a mandatory landlord register was announced for 2026 but has not arrived.

All of that is more than seemed possible for decades. And all of it acts on the existing stock. Whoever holds a contract pays less in real terms. Whoever holds none goes on negotiating the free price. The longer minimum term makes existing arrangements more secure — and at the same time reduces how often a flat comes onto the market at all. Both are true, and anyone who tells you only one half is selling you something.

Why squatting no longer works

Since 2021 there have been occupations in the Mariannengasse, twice in the Breite Gasse, in the Harmoniegasse, in Innsbruck. All evicted, mostly within hours, treated as an assembly, dispersed by procedure, followed by consideration of legal steps. None of these actions created housing and none seriously tried to.

That is not a weakness of the people involved. That is the difference from 1976. The Arena became a symbol because the conflict stayed open long enough for a public to form. That time no longer exists. The negotiating path that once led from occupation via the precarium to a contract is shut. Cities today negotiate over cultural funding, not over occupied building stock.

What works instead is less romantic: buy the buildings and immobilise the title. The Mietshäuser Syndikat, organised in Austria through habiTAT, does exactly that — solidarity-based direct loans, a house association, a veto construction, no resale. The sentence is the same as in 1982: the houses belong to those who live in them. The means is the opposite. And the limit is the price: an owner-occupied flat in Vienna cost 5,512 euros per square metre on average in 2025, and a tenement building costs millions. As a model that holds. As an answer to the housing question it does not.

What is left

The buildings stand. Refurbished, subsidised, contractually secured, culturally undisputed, and surrounded by precisely the upgrading against whose early forms they once set out. Construction is at the lowest level since the survey began. Vacancy is not counted. Regulation protects the stock and leaves access lying. Around 20,000 people are registered as homeless, with a high unrecorded figure, and eviction prevention is not even anchored in federal law.

The old charge was: there is enough, it is only wrongly distributed. It is fifty years old and still unanswered. Not because anyone refuted it, but because a decision was made not to look.

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