

Two Markets, One Stock

Squatting as an Indicator and the Division of the Austrian Housing Market in 2026

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Abstract

This paper proposes reading squatting not as movement history but as an indicator: occupations occur where existing, legally allocated and actually accessible space diverge and no institutional mediation of that difference exists. Drawing on Austrian material from 1918 to 2026, it shows that the form of action follows the situation rather than conviction: it emerges in the 1970s, disappears in the 1990s as the gap closes, and returns from the 2010s in altered form because the gap has shifted — no longer vacancy against need but stock against access. Testing this against the data of 2026 reveals a divided market: the official average for existing tenancies stands at 10.5 euros per square metre gross, while the median asking rent is 16.09 euros nationwide and 22.41 euros in Vienna. New construction reached its lowest level since the survey series began, with 31,979 dwellings authorised in 2025, and fell a further 7.7 per cent in the first quarter of 2026. The regulation of 2024 to 2026 protects existing tenancies and does not reach market entry. Affordability must therefore be assessed by market position rather than by country.

Keywords: squatting, housing policy, vacancy, gentrification, Austria, tenancy law, transdisciplinary research

1. The problem

The literature on the Austrian squatting movement is historical, the literature on the Austrian housing market is economic, and the two rarely meet. This matters, because the movement's central claim is an empirical one: housing exists but is wrongly distributed. That claim cannot be tested with movement sources or with market data alone.

The paper therefore formulates a question operationalisable in both fields. Three quantities are distinguished: existing space as a matter of building and stock statistics; legally allocated space as a question of ownership, tenancy, zoning and allocation; and actually accessible space as a question of price, contract availability and capital requirements. The thesis: occupations occur where these three diverge and no institutional mediation takes hold. They measure not the radicalism of a scene but the tension between stock and access.

2. Data and approach

For the historical part, movement literature, museum research, contemporary film documentation and media reporting are examined, each treated as an interested source. For the present-day part, official statistics (microcensus housing survey, building activity statistics, EU-SILC, average property prices), central bank data, association data from the limited-profit sector, land-register analyses and platform analyses of asking rents are used. Legal sources and European Commission materials complete the regulatory level. The data vintage is 5 September 2026.

Two methodological rules govern interpretation. First, stock and asking data are not mixed: the microcensus covers around 1.8 million existing principal tenancies including the limited-profit and municipal sectors, while platform data cover listed properties on the free market. Any juxtaposition is a contrast between two market zones, not a time series. Second, figures are used only with their basis of collection stated; this applies in particular to vacancy.

3. The historical finding

Austrian experience with unauthorised appropriation begins not in 1976 but in 1918. After the war the Viennese settlement movement erected wild settlements without permits; the city responded not with eviction but by founding a building materials institute in 1921, organising cooperatives, and producing 8,340 settlement houses by 1933. This establishes a pattern repeated fifty years later: appropriation generates a public, the administration responds with resources below the demand, and acceptance ends the appropriation and begins the institution.

The occupations of the 1970s follow this pattern. The Amerlinghaus was occupied in 1975 and handed over as a refurbished cultural centre in 1978; the Arena lost its site in 1976 and received a smaller one. The WUK emerged in 1981 and remained until 2020 under a precarium, a loan revocable at any time — a construction that blocked maintenance on both sides and whose replacement by a lease first made possible a general refurbishment costing 22.38 million euros. Where, by contrast, cultural spaces handed over became permanent residential use, the conflict ended differently: the clearance of the buildings in the Aegidigasse and Spalowskygasse in August 1988 was the largest operation of its kind in Austrian history.

The difference lies not in the radicalism of those involved but in the negotiability of the use. Culture could be funded because competence and budget existed. A recognised residential use without legal title would have set a precedent.

4. The present-day finding

Testing against the data of 2026 reveals not a uniform price explosion but a division.

On price levels, residential property prices rose 2.1 per cent nominally in 2025 against 3.8 per cent inflation, hence fell again in real terms; in the second quarter of 2026 the year-on-year

rate was 3.6 per cent, with Vienna rising more slowly at 2.9 per cent than the rest of the country at 4.2 per cent.

On rents, the official average for existing tenancies in the first quarter of 2026 is 695.1 euros per dwelling, or 10.5 euros per square metre gross. The median asking rent for the same quarter is 16.09 euros nationwide and 22.41 euros in Vienna. Between stock and market entry there is thus a factor of more than two in Vienna.

On supply, new construction reached its lowest level since the series began in 2010, with 31,979 dwellings authorised in new buildings in 2025, around 40 per cent below 2015; in the first quarter of 2026 authorisations fell a further 7.7 per cent. The limited-profit sector, which carries the central price-dampening function, reported around 11,900 completions for 2025 and expects a further decline in 2026.

On vacancy — the movement's historical core concept — the data situation is itself the finding. The circulating orders of magnitude of roughly 230,000 and 653,028 dwellings differ by a factor of three because they measure different things, and neither comes from a statistical authority. Since the constitutional amendment of 2024 the levy competence rests with the provinces; enforcement is weak, and Vienna abstains.

On regulation, the rent package has since 1 January 2026 capped increases in the regulated sector at one per cent, and at two per cent for 2027, limited adjustment to once a year no earlier than April, and extended the minimum fixed term for commercial landlords to five years. The direction of effect is unambiguous: it protects those who hold a contract.

5. Discussion

The three quantities diverged in the 1970s, converged in the 1990s, and have diverged again since the 2010s, though in a different place. Space today exists and is occupied, it is allocated, and it is no longer reachable for new entrants. The form of action has changed function accordingly: where nothing stands empty to appropriate, what is occupied is defended and the legislator is addressed. The documented occupations of 2021 to 2025 are short, media-directed interventions whose eviction is factored in.

A refinement of the public debate follows. The claim that the housing market has derailed holds for the re-letting and purchase segments in metropolitan areas and does not hold for the protected stock. Holding both statements at once is the minimum analytical requirement. Instruments acting on the existing stock barely improve the position of those without a tenancy; instruments aimed at new construction run into the void during a phase of collapsed building activity. The conflict of objectives is inherent to price regulation and cannot be resolved by it.

6. Limits

The thesis 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. Neither is the case in the Austrian material. It is

nonetheless not fully testable, because the first of the three quantities is the most poorly surveyed: as long as vacancy is not recorded nationwide under a uniform definition, it remains an estimate. For the years 1975 to 1995 no systematic record of Austrian occupations exists; the chronologies used are selections biased towards cases with supra-regional coverage. Statements on legislation in progress stand under the reservation of the editorial deadline.

7. Conclusion

Fifty years after its formulation, the movement's central empirical charge has been neither refuted nor confirmed, because the quantity under dispute is not officially recorded. This is not a marginal finding but the result: the dispute over empty space has stalled short of the dispute over the number. The buildings stand; so does the question.

Literature and sources

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Data sources: Statistics Austria (microcensus housing survey, building activity statistics, EU-SILC, average property prices); Oesterreichische Nationalbank (residential property price index); Association of Limited-Profit Housing Developers; RE/MAX property survey on a land-register basis; platform analysis of asking rents Q1 2026; Rent Indexation Act and Tenancy Inflation Relief Act; Viennese Building Code amendment LGBL. 37/2023; federal constitutional amendment 2024; European Commission, Affordable Housing Plan.

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