

First Post:

Lessons from Vienna

written by Michelle Starratt

I spent a week in Vienna learning about its housing system, and I came home with a lot to think about.

Vienna's approach to housing didn't happen overnight. Its modern housing system reaches back more than 100 years, to the period after World War I, when the city began making very different choices about the role of government and the importance of housing, transportation, healthcare, and social welfare.

Those choices helped shape what became known as Red Vienna, a period when the city made major investments in public housing and other services intended to improve the lives of working families.

What struck me most is that housing in Vienna isn't treated as a separate issue.

Housing is connected to transportation. Transportation is connected to where people work, shop, go to school, and spend time with their families. Parks, childcare, small businesses, healthcare, public spaces, and climate planning are all part of the conversation.

And there is a larger idea underneath it all: What do we need to build today so that this remains a good place to live 20, 50, or even 100 years from now?

That is very different from the way we often approach housing in California, where we can spend enormous amounts of time trying to solve one project, one funding gap, or one immediate crisis at a time.

Vienna is certainly not a paradise. It has housing challenges, inequality, political debates, and social problems of its own. And I don't think the lesson is that California should simply copy Vienna.

The more useful question is: What can we learn from more than a century of doing things differently?

Over the next several weeks, I'm going to share some of the lessons I brought home.

I'll talk about long-range planning and what it means to plan for future generations. I'll look at the relationship between housing and transportation, and at how neighborhoods are designed so people can reach the things they need in their daily lives.

I'll explore how Vienna uses public land, how new neighborhoods make room for small businesses and community spaces, how affordable housing is maintained over generations, and how housing and neighborhood design are becoming part of the response to climate change.

Most importantly, I want to ask what any of this might mean for us here in Alameda County and the Bay Area.

Not: How do we become Vienna?

But: What has Vienna learned over the last 100 years that might help us think differently about the next 100?

Finally, a huge thank-you to Jennifer LeSar and Anu Natarajan at the Global Policy Leadership Academy for leading an extraordinary group of more than 40 delegates from across California. We had the opportunity to see another housing system up close, ask a lot of questions, and challenge some of our own assumptions about what is possible.

I'm looking forward to sharing what I learned.

Lessons from Vienna begins here.