

### 3. The Case of Sargfabrik, (Vienna, Austria)



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# Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	3
Executive summary.....	4
1. Introduction.....	7
1.1 Timeline .....	8
2 Anthropological analysis .....	9
2.1 The story .....	9
2.2 Governance.....	11
2.3 Values and identity.....	12
2.3.1 Cultural values .....	13
2.3.2 Social inclusion.....	14
2.3.3 Solidarity economy .....	14
2.3.4 Jobs and voluntary work .....	15
2.3.5 Architectural and environmental innovation.....	16
2.3.6 Heritage protection .....	17
2.3.7 Other values .....	17
3 Architectural analysis .....	18
3.1 Main characteristics of the buildings .....	18
3.2 Adaptive reuse .....	22
4 Context .....	24
4.1 Geographical and Demographical analysis .....	24
4.2 Policies and regulation .....	28
5 The model.....	29
5.1 “Wohnheim”.....	29
5.2 Organizational structure.....	30
5.3 Financing.....	32
6 Impacts .....	32
7 Future challenges .....	34
8 References .....	36
Our Matzner quarter today (2018). <a href="https://matznerviertel.at/unser-leitbild/">https://matznerviertel.at/unser-leitbild/</a> .	36

## Executive summary

The adaptive reuse of the architectural remains of the former coffin factory (Sargfabrik), the embracing of its past (even if only partially) and as a result combining the idea of a home with that of the activities surrounding death is a surprisingly avantgarde project. And making it more avantgarde is the fact that the housing concept put forward by the Association for Integrative Living (Verein für Integrative Lebensgestaltung, <https://www.sargfabrik.at/Home/Die-Sargfabrik/Verein>) - formed as a bottom up initiative - was based on collective living arrangement, a very much talked about/often supported housing form today, but less so in the 1980s, when the story of the Sargfabrik began (Lang, Carriou and Czischke 2018). The reuse of the Sargfabrik is an illustrative example of how bottom up initiatives can navigate in the bureaucratic field successfully to reach their goals, but of how uncomfortable heritage can be reinterpreted, how strategic forgetting can be employed and how an aptly employed new narrative can influence the wider environment, contributing to its profound transformation on a neighbourhood level. (Pendlebury, Wang and Law 2017)

The Sargfabrik is a housing project with a very clear social and cultural message and explicit social goals, focusing on integration and social equality both among its residents and in its wider neighbourhood. It is a place of integration that develops an urban space within itself. Along with the roof garden, a number of common areas are available for communication and pleasure. The publicly accessible cultural house, restaurant, kindergarten, conference room and a twenty-four-hour bathhouse make it a meeting place for people of different ages and backgrounds.

It is situated in the 14<sup>th</sup> district in Vienna, in an area that had been traditionally full of small workshops but was rather desolate by the early 1980s, when the story of the Association began, as a result of changes in industrial production and city use patterns. The once rather prestigious factory (the largest of its kind in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy) was closed, creating an environment of industrial waste. Although reusing the site required architectural compromises from the Association, it also offered opportunities, and importantly it was available. The building was not under any official heritage protection, still, the members of the Association decided to keep a single physical relic from its past, the chimney. It has been maintained ever since despite the increasing costs. The connection with the factory's history has been strengthened on an intangible level as well, both in the design – one could argue that the balconies resemble strongly a coffin – and in the narrative. The latter has been supported both by keeping the name Sargfabrik and the organisation of two exhibitions on site about the factory's history.

Ties to the history of Vienna appear yet at another level as well: although the specific constellation of the project is very individual, its creation is embedded deeply in the Viennese housing history. Its success is indivisible from the tradition of supporting affordable housing for the residents in Vienna and is part and parcel of the municipality's very conscious project to accommodate innovative living

arrangements and bottom-up social innovation in the territory of its jurisdiction. In this sense it connects the municipal working-class homes (Arbeitshöfer) of the 1920s with the large-scale projects of the 2000s that include the building of a new city district in Aspern. All these housing projects put an emphasis on common facilities, communal living and the tradition of relatively accessible housing.

Coming from the scene of the 1980s green movements, the ecological aspects were always considered to be of outstanding importance for this group of people. These original residents of the Sargfabrik were mostly middle income. They fought very hard for their dream, overcoming both administrative and financial obstacles, and weathering the almost 10-year process between founding the Association (1987) and completing the first phase of the building (1996). (The second phase, the so-called Miss Sargfabrik was finished in 2000.) Importantly, despite the difficulties posed by the long waiting period, the recollection of the original residents is unanimous in a way that these years have contributed to strengthening the community, who have developed effective ways of handling conflicts and resolving disputes.

The Sargfabrik was realised before collaborative housing arrangements became more mainstream, and it can easily be termed as a classic social innovation project. (Oosterlynck et al. 2013) Founding members not only wanted to change the lives of those involved but also had bigger intentions – they wanted to influence an entire Viennese neighbourhood. To achieve this, they have taken integration very seriously, practicing it in different aspects of their daily operation:

- they maintain comparatively affordable rental prices and support a self-sustained social fund to integrate people of different income levels in the Sargfabrik housing complex. 15% of all housing units are reserved for elderly, disabled or displaced;
- they seek to integrate people with different working capacities maintaining a cafe where people with disabilities can work;
- they consciously integrate the world from outside to their daily routines through the public kindergarten, the swimming pool and most importantly the cultural centre; and
- finally, on a more abstract level they integrate the old with the new when they reuse local history to create a new building and environment.

Today, this multi-level integration project is of unquestionable success, with waiting lists for people wanting to move in and similar housing arrangements appearing elsewhere in Vienna. Furthermore, the Sargfabrik has been the topic of countless academic inquiries and political visits, including mayors from abroad. Despite these, the future holds many questions, most importantly that of the sustainability. As it seems now the current cost level could be hard to maintain, the current rent level is lower than in the neighbourhood, but it is doubtful how long this can last. The building complex needs imminent renovation, and so far, the community does not have the required funding. There is also the question of demography and age composition of the community. The original residents have

aged, but they do not want to move out, while many children, who grew up here would like to stay. And finally, the relationship with the neighbourhood is changing – whereas the surroundings used to be run down, it has been gentrifying steadily, partially as a result of general housing market and economic conditions, and partially as a result of the Sargfabrik itself, which brought it new life to the once derelict area.

# 1. Introduction

*"Living – culture – integration"* – this is the motto of Sargfabrik, one of Austria's most complex bottom-up housing projects. In 1996, on the site of a former coffin manufacturer in West Vienna (Matzner, District 14), an innovative style of living was realized by a non-profit housing association. But the Sargfabrik is much more than a housing model— it's a way of life, something that resembles a small urban district, a "village in the city". Since then, the Sargfabrik is admired by many – because it is an unusual mix of public and private, because it is the expression of an individual will and an outstanding example of what can be achieved by a group of people with a shared mission. Grassroots democracy, co-determination, participatory planning and operation, collective ownership – these are the most commonly used terms related to the Sargfabrik project. However, what really made it work is the people and their communication. People who *"wanted to live there, and wanted to live together"*.

Due to the unexpected success and immense popularity of Sargfabrik's apartments, in 1998 the association purchased another small plot on the opposite side of the street and built another experimental unit. In this project, known as Miss Sargfabrik, the architectural focus was again on the community, with the motto "Separated and connected", reflected both in the common spaces (shared kitchen, laundry, library) and the apartments.

	Sargfabrik	Miss-Sargfabrik
<b>Plot of Land</b>	4711 m <sup>2</sup>	850 m <sup>2</sup>
<b>Property area</b>	2747 m <sup>2</sup>	608 m <sup>2</sup>
<b>Usable floor space</b>	7922 m <sup>2</sup>	4372 m <sup>2</sup>
<b>Start of building work</b>	April 1994	April 1999
<b>Completion</b>	July 1996	September 2000
<b>Total building costs</b>	13,6 million Euro	5,4 million Euro

**Table 1: Main project data**

The project is also characterized by ecologically friendly design and optimized energy consumption (green electricity, composting, solar water heating, etc.).

Besides the dwellings, the building also contains a restaurant, a culture house, a seminar room, a Turkish bath, a swimming pool and a kindergarten, the majority of which are open public spaces. Based on a co-housing structure, the residential complex offers a variety of amenities such as a car sharing system and laundromat. Considering all these functions, it is obvious that Sargfabrik is a professional NGO like functioning similarly to a business company. There is a professional management, a balance sheet, all kinds of supervisor bodies that are involved in the every-day operation. There are responsible parties for all kinds of areas like the bathhouse, the seminar room, the events hall with its cultural program, and many more.

## 1.1 Timeline

End of 19<sup>th</sup> century - the coffin factory "Maschner & Söhne" was built

1970 – production in the factory stops, the building abandoned to decay

1987 – Founding of the "Association for Integrated Lifestyles" with the aim of developing a housing and cultural project

1989 – Purchase of the "Maschner&Söhne" building in Vienna 14<sup>th</sup> district, formerly the largest coffin manufacturers under the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The factory was built at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and coffins were produced until 1970.

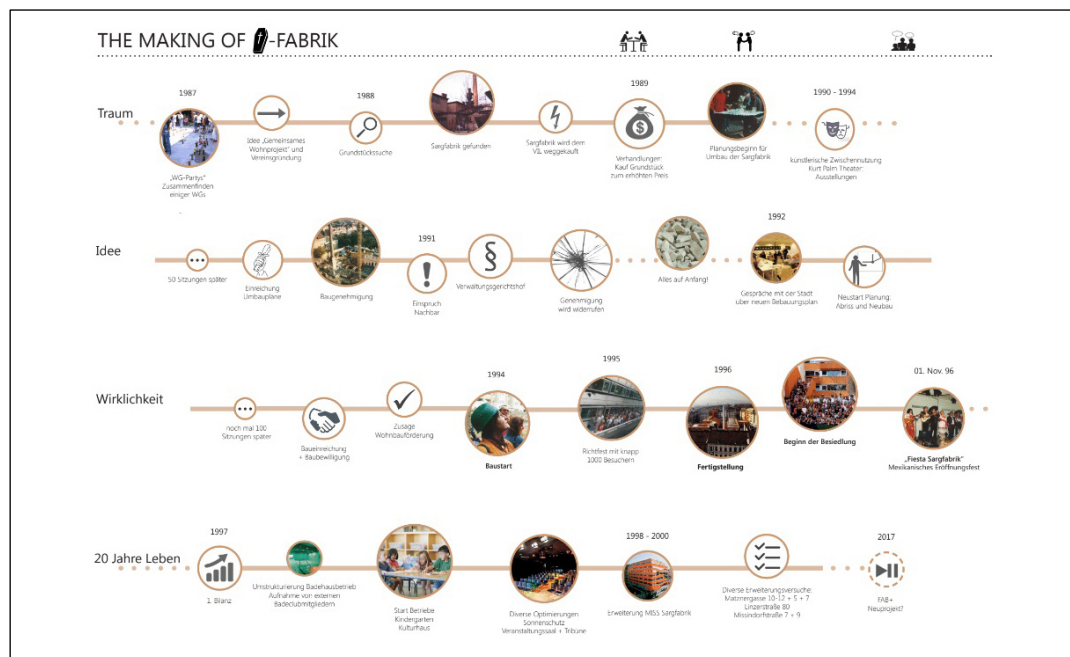
1992 – Planning proposals made by architects from the Baukünstlerkollektiv BKK-2 (now BKK-3, <http://www.bkk-3.com/>) are rejected by neighbouring residents; alterations and new plans are made

1994 – Start of building work; the building at No. 8 Matznergasse is renovated and included into the complex

1996 – (autumn) Opening of the "redeveloped" Sargfabrik: 73 accommodation units for around 110 adults and 45 children and teenagers

1998 – Encouraged by positive results the association purchases the neighbouring No.10 Missindorfstraße.

2000 – Opening of "Miss Sargfabrik" on the street corner, with 39 accommodation units



**Picture 1. The making of Sargfabrik  
(Source: BKK-3)**

## 2 Anthropological analysis

### 2.1 The story

*"We wanted to make the world better with our engagement, and this spirit is still there inside us."* (SF2: Board member, 2019)

This project has a long history, dating back to the eighties. At that time a group of people got together and raised the idea of *"let's start a fun project where not everything is run-of-the-mill, something that goes beyond the traditions of the nuclear family and makes living interesting – or at least designed in an interesting way."* They wanted to realize a housing association, which collectively accommodates different models of life and cultural possibilities and set up a registered association for integrative living in cooperation with two architects. Their aim was to create a community- and leisure-based housing estate and to design the new living quarters according to their ideas.

At the very beginning it was just a small group of friends (10-12 people), they did not even know what they really wanted, but the essentials were clear: they did not want to live lonely in the city and they wanted to develop something in collaboration with others. These people were coming from the different scenes of civil society (at that time they called it green political movements) – mobility, peace, school, feminism, ecology, etc. They had the same interest, all of them felt an inner mission to make the world a better place to live. During the initial gatherings, they discussed the basic ideas of a housing project and drafted fundamental papers on mutual responsibility for children, shared economies, social and cultural initiatives – utopias of a social-idealistic housing and living situation. And they started to look for a suitable property. One of the options was found in a newspaper announcement, saying that the Sargfabrik, a coffin factory was going bankrupt. Everyone thought the building was too big, too inconceivable. However, they decided to go ahead and have a look. On May 3, 1989 the Association purchased the building.

The first design envisaged the preservation of the old production hall, the housing units were to be placed within this attractive brick building. In order to preserve the hall, a decided disadvantage was taken into account: the south-facing dwellings at the rear faced onto the hall, only their north front projected into the open. The project was submitted for planning permission in this form and was approved. Objections were raised by the Constitutional Court and the project was halted. With all kinds of problems related to submission, zoning, and building regulations, the building was increasingly subjected to moisture, despite the protective measures taken. Eventually, they made it to a point where everything was approved: all of the building criteria, the insulating of steel beams, the preservation of the brick wall outside. But the costs escalated and they had to draw the line. The architects then made a suggestion and the Association agreed:

they had the building permit for renovation, and they decided to follow it by partially tearing the old factory down.

*"...all these collective facilities are actually missing in today's urban planning, where individual homes are being built. But that does not provide a vibrant city anymore."* (SF7: member of Association, 2019)

During the long years of waiting for the different permissions, the Association kept on holding regular meetings. One outcome of these deliberations was the decision about building not a normal apartment block but a "residential home" or hostel (Wohnheim) which would belong to the association and be used by its members. The disadvantage of this solution is that no one actually owns the dwelling used. But this approach also had an important advantage: through subsidies it was possible to actually build those communal facilities which make this "residential home" so special. It was obvious from the very beginning, that beside the dwellings, the community will need some collective facilities like the bathing house, a café, a kindergarten, a seminar room – so all these functions were part of the original idea of the Sargfabrik project.

*"When buying something in my opinion there are two fundamentally different models: Either we buy what we need and then figure out how to get reimbursed later. Or we take a systematic approach and determine: what do we need? How much will it cost? Which other options might we have? But in a way that we get a grip on the office finances. And this way we can determine that each one of us has to contribute a certain amount."* (SF7: member of Association, 2019) – this question was raised in several meetings at the beginning of the project. And finally, this systematic approach was applied throughout the way.

In 1996, the vision of self-defined living together finally became a reality. 110 adults and 45 children moved into the 73 accommodation units. Due to the unexpected success of Sargfabrik's residence and operation, the Association purchased another plot on the opposite side of the street in 2000, and built another experimental house. In addition to the extraordinary architecture of this second building, there are also some special facilities: a socio-pedagogical living community of the Youth office of the City of Vienna; three wheelchair-accessible housing units, small apartments for students and young people, five residential units with studio character as "home office", a guest living unit, teleworking, a club room especially for young people, a library and a communal kitchen with dining area.

Both Sargfabrik and Miss Sargfabrik were committed to participatory design strategies and community engagement: during the planning process (7 years for Sargfabrik, 2 years for Miss Sargfabrik) BKK-2 (later BKK-3) initiated discussions and brainstorming sessions with the potential tenants to find out their personal desires as well as communal aspiration, and ways in which the building would still be functional in 20 years' time.



**Picture 2. Sargfabrik and Miss Sargfabrik  
(picture made by author)**

## 2.2 Governance

*"When I consider the term codetermination, then to me it means that something needs to be decided and I can do a little participating. We were always interested in creating things, in embracing processes and actually influencing their creation. When I take the concept of codetermination a bit further, then it means assuming responsibility."* (SF9: Board member, 2019)

Back in the eighties, when this group of people founded the Association, two objectives were clear: (1) they wanted to share what they had and (2) they wanted to create a "better small society". They always tried to choose the most democratic way of organizing things. But *"democracy is hard work in decision making"* – said one member of the Association. By now, after more than 30 years of living together, they became *"masters of conflict resolution and communication"* (SF1: office manager, 2019).

At the beginning, there was an attempt to reach consensus on every single decision. Sometimes this was a very time consuming and tiring process and the "winners" were those who could stay awake until the end of the debate. But on the other hand, the long debates helped to fully understand the counterarguments. *"This was a great lesson in social skills. Naturally it cost us lots of blood, sweat and tears"* – remembers one member. At certain point they involved an external professional to moderate the debates. This was also part of the learning process.

**The decision-making process** evolved during the years. *"Can you live with that" – this was a magic sentence at the beginning. One didn't have to say "yes, I want it that way" but instead "yes, I can live with that". This was a completely different approach, one that made it possible to enter into compromise without giving oneself up completely. During the construction/renovation works people had to make decisions about million things concerning the design, architecture, materials, etc. BKK-2 had to deal with a group of 70*

*people, everyone having very strong ideas. But every concept was discussed with the people, everything was developed in an organic way, time was devoted for every idea – this could have never happened in a “normal” housing project on the competitive market. “It was like a 7-year ongoing housing symposium” – remembers one of the architects involved in the project. Because everyone wanted to know each other, many of more unusual architectural designs could happen under the premise of communication. When the architects proposed to put all the balconies together, it was obvious that this solution will increase the intersection of everyone. But they agreed that “opening is not to eliminate people’s privacy, but to have the opportunity to open” (SF1: office manager, 2019). It was the time when they realized that the consensus was not efficient enough, so they shifted to a two-thirds majority. It was necessary to arrive at decisions more quickly because of the building deadlines. Though they still aimed to strive for consensus.*

Communication, talking, chatterboxes are the essence of living here. From this aspect, it’s really like a “village in the city”. Everything makes the rounds very quickly. The laundry, the staircase, the restaurant are the main meeting points.



**Picture 3. Sargfabrik meetings** (Source: <http://www.mvd.org/prj/leben-in-der-sargfabrik/>)

## 2.3 Values and identity

Nowadays Sargfabrik has a good reputation, people from all over the world are coming to visit it, study, gather ideas. “Why is there only one Sargfabrik” - they usually ask. Well, on one hand it was a zeitgeist phenomenon. The 80’s in Vienna was a time when the city government supported all kinds of fresh initiatives, bank loans were quite easily accessible, building sites were affordable and people were full of utopian visions about how to develop a better society. In the case of Sargfabrik all these things led to a co-housing model with very strong identity of openness and connection. The main values of this innovative style of living (“Living-culture-integration”) are existing from the very beginning, but one special feature of Sargfabrik is that the status quo is never too long, once a goal is reached, several other goals are identified that invite collaboration.

### 2.3.1 Cultural values

As stated in the project's motto, cultural values play a fundamental role of everyday life in Sargfabrik. People are engaged in various cultural events and activities, and they have lots of common spaces for these purposes. The entity has its own "**Kulturhaus**" (<https://www.sargfabrik.at/Home/Kultur/Kulturhaus>), which has already secured a permanent place in Vienna's cultural scene through its varied programs and events. With its high quality design, programmable lighting and sound equipment and the flexible use of space, the room is suitable for concerts, dance and theatre productions, readings, children's theatre or clubbing. The cultural program of the Kulturhaus covers a great variety of European and non-European music, from jazz to world music and folk traditions from the most diverse cultures in the world. The concert hall has a capacity of 300 people, and there is a small bar for snacks and drinks outside. Sargfabrik organizes about 30 concerts per year.

The cultural programs for children are also very popular, they are a particular attraction for the young audiences.

When there is no other event, the hall can be used by community choirs to sing or it can be rented by music groups to rehearse. The vast majority of the audience are citizens of Vienna (and not just from the neighbourhood). In Vienna the small concert halls like this can get a subsidy of 100,000 euros/year from the City Council. This subsidy plus the income coming from the tickets are adequate to balance the high performance fees and operating/maintenance expenses.



**Picture 4. Concert hall (picture made by author)**

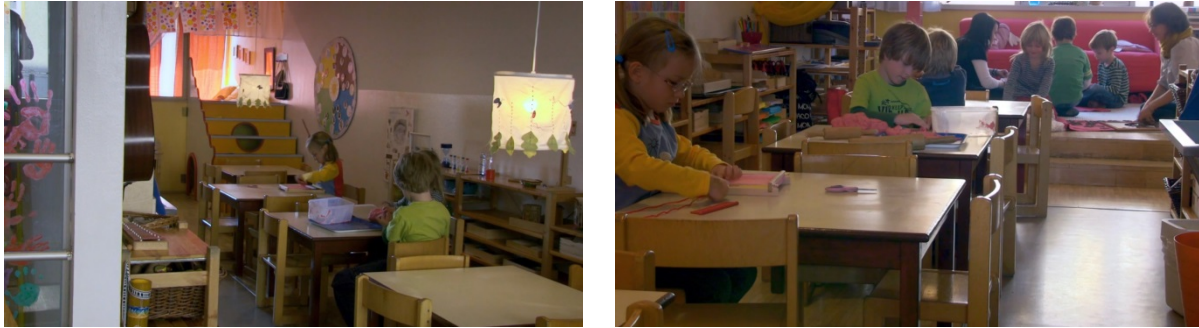
The Sargfabrik's children house (<https://www.sargfabrik.at/Home/Kinder/Kinderhaus>) offers space for varied and exciting activities which strengthen the creative learning process of children. It is a private institution subsidized by municipal funds. Although the kindergarten operates within the public educational framework, as a private institution it is maintained by the community of the Association.

The Kindergarten has a capacity of around 60 children between ages 2 and 6. They are divided into three groups and supervised by trained kindergarten teachers who have German, Turkish and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian as their mother tongues. The pedagogic principles are based on the teachings of Maria Montessori. In the

Deliverable 2.2

Observatory Case report: The Sargfabrik

afternoons, after-school educational support is offered. The children have access to the art and craft rooms. Each week they are accompanied to the bathing house. They regularly visit the theatre productions in the Culture House and the seminar room is used for gymnastics and other activities. Children's meals are produced in the Sargfabrik Café-Restaurant.



**Picture 5. Kindergarten (picture made by author)**

### 2.3.2 Social inclusion

Social inclusion/integration was also part of the original mission of the project. The intention was – and still is – to “*mirror real life*” (SF3: architect, 2019). This is why they are so concerned with involving and integrating various groups of people. There are currently around 150 adults and 60 children living in the 112 accommodation units. They provide space for a socio-pedagogical living community of the City of Vienna's Youth and Family Offices. There are also seven places for disabled people and six accommodation units with limited contracts for tenants in need of short term housing and social housing for refugees.

In Miss Sargfabrik many flats are between an area of 30 and 70m<sup>2</sup>, because they wanted to enable single parents and singles to also participate in the project.

*The Association also found a way to involve interested parties who could not afford living here. As the building is a collectively owned residential housing, no one would be eligible for social benefits to support rental payments or housing costs, so an internal distribution system with social fund was created (a fixed fee of 27 cents per square metre useable living area is levied for a solidarity pool). This money is distributed in the background – no one knows the specifics. There are two ombudsmen who allocate the money to those who cannot afford the rent. This is kind of an internal social transfer. Also, for those who could not afford it, the association has taken on part of their mortgage, or these residents pay it back slowly over very extended periods. There are also some social donation of people who lived here before they died (one of them is a former Hungarian refugee of the '56 revolution) – these funds are also allocated for social housing.*

### 2.3.3 Solidarity economy

The Café-Restaurant Sargfabrik situated right at the entrance of the building is a typical pub-restaurant, functioning as an important meeting point for residents. In addition to the culinary purposes, it also has a social mission.

*As a socio-economic enterprise, they offer people over the age of 50 a temporary job in order to increase their professional know-how and thus their chances on the job market. The restaurant is operated by Der Kümmeri, the social-economic employment project of Job-TransFair GmbH (<https://www.bfi.wien/ueber-uns/organisation/abteilungen/job-transfair/>). It is funded by the Public Employment Service of Vienna. This model can be considered as a win-win situation for all parties. The Sargfabrik community benefits from the services provided by the restaurant, and at the same time with its tolerant attitude and supportive atmosphere it is an ideal working place for these people.*



**Picture 6. Café-Restaurant Sargfabrik**  
(picture made by author)

### 2.3.4 Jobs and voluntary work

An “office-style” administration is responsible for the necessary organisation and communication needs of the housing administration and management. At the moment fifteen people are employed.

Members of association are actively engaged in all areas of communal life. Communal life is greatly influenced by these important unpaid initiatives and work groups, like for example the planning of the legendary “Sargfabrik Ball”, looking after the garden, the library, organising diverse birthday celebrations and normal parties or running a cooking group that prepares weekly meals in the communal kitchen.

### 2.3.5 Architectural and environmental innovation

Numerous architectural and environmental innovations were realized both in Sargfabrik and Miss Sargfabrik projects, for which they were awarded by several prizes. A dense, but at the same time very green architecture was realised. There is a biotope in the inner courtyard and a rooftop-garden. The method of construction used energy saving technologies. A high living quality was received without causing additional land consumption.

The project set new architectural standards in terms of ecological history. Large glass fronts with southern orientation make the 4.5 m high living rooms bright and transparent. Heating is with district heating via wall heating. One of the roofs is equipped with solar collectors for water heating, the other with a spacious roof garden.

People are living in a perimeter block, however, it really functions like a recreational area. The courtyard within Miss Sargfabrik is like an oasis of calm, the dense vegetation provides such a microclimate that eliminates the need for air conditioning even on the hottest summer days.

In general it can be stated that the technical and regulatory requirements did not lead to compromises but raised creativity and brought innovative solutions.



**Picture 7. Rooftop, green areas, solar collectors (picture made by author)**

### 2.3.6 Heritage protection

*"We rather look into the future, but sometimes we remember..."* (SF9: Board member, 2019)

*"The history is alive...even if it's a little morbid"* (SF3: architect, 2019)

Heritage protection comes in two forms: the protection of the building and the protection of intangible heritage.

Today, only the layout of the new building, the still standing chimney - and the name Sargfabrik ("coffin factory") - are reminiscent of what was once the largest coffin factory in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy – the "Maschner & Söhne". Although the first designs envisaged the preservation of the old production hall (the housing units were to be placed in this building), later it became clear that the old building could not be saved and it was replaced by a new building – preserving only the original development structure. The chimney still stays in the middle of the building complex, as a symbol of the past.

Although heritage protection is admittedly not very important for the community, they decided to preserve the past in the name of the project. This turned out to be a smart decision, as it often raises the question "where does it come from" and then the old stories can be told.

The community has already organized two exhibitions about the old factory, which attracted many visitors from the area and proved to be a great opportunity for collecting memories from the past and keeping the heritage alive.



**Picture 8. Before and after re-use (Source: BKK – and picture made by author)**

### 2.3.7 Other values

Another place that makes Sargfabrik famous is its bathing house. The bath is open to the community residents free of charge throughout the day, but there are also about 500 paid bath members. Here one can experience diverse international ways

of bathing: there is a Finnish sauna, a cold water pool, a tepidarium and a heated swimming pool. The bathing house is open for members 24 hours per day. Support is also offered for disabled bathers, and there are timeslots allocated for babies, small children and events organized by residents.



**Picture 9. The famous Badehaus (picture made by author)**

### 3 Architectural analysis

#### 3.1 Main characteristics of the buildings



**Picture 10. Location of Sargfabrik and Miss Sargfabrik (Source: BKK-3)**

The housing scheme was designed by a group of young architects, BKK-2 (later BKK-3 <http://www.bkk-3.com/>).

The structure of the coffin factory was not very stable, and despite the protective measures, during the long years of waiting for permissions the building was increasingly subject to moisture. Because of the serious corrosion of the old wood

structure and Vienna's strict thermal insulation regulations it seemed a better solution to build a new building. Although there are not many reserved parts, the architects worked hard to preserve the layout of the original factory. The central long-shaped pool is the main space of the former production hall. The new block is a completely new structure with the exception of the chimney. It took ten years of planning and three years of construction, and finally it was opened in 1996.

At the beginning it was a bright orange building. This colour resembled the original red brick building of the original factory. (Unfortunately, the paints did not prove to be UV-resistant, so now the building has a "Manner-rose" colour.)

The new Sargfabrik building is a multi-storey maisonette building. This allowed the architects to create rooms with various heights. Bedrooms are up to 2,25 m high, while the halls are of 5m heights. The units are 4,6 m wide and each of them have an individual balcony overlooking the courtyard. The units are placed in rows and can be accessed from an external corridor. They have large windows facing southward. There is a wide choice of apartments for different family arrangements. The whole Sargfabrik has a flat roof with the exception of the façade facing the street, which has a sloped roof in order to achieve visual equity to the rest of the blocks. The roofs were either dotted with solar panels, or vegetation. This solution served two purposes: it was ecological, and it created private outdoor spaces for the families.



**Picture 11. The sloped roof of the façade (picture made by author)**

The open spaces in Sargfabrik are several courtyards, each of them with a communal function (gardens, playground, a small football field, etc.)



**Picture 12. Open spaces (picture made by author)**

The materials used were reinforced concrete and glass. The inner walls could be arranged according to the wish of the residents.

One of the architecturally most significant novelties applied was the “box system”. This means integrating a half-level into the existing grid system. The architects preserved the original development structure, they kept the layout of the building elements and the original 4.8m grid and even the unusual room height of 2.26 meters in the boxes, which however also encompass a double-height space oriented to the south. This reflects BKK’s philosophy that “if one plans intelligently, then extremely low room heights in secondary spaces are acceptable if the living area offers sufficient volume to provide the necessary spatial differentiation”.

*The architects didn’t want to take any risk in designing the building. So first they built a 1:1 testing model of the box, and the residents could test how it works for them. People lived there for a few days, and then the concept was accepted. One “box” (or living unit) comprises of a 45m<sup>2</sup> space on the ground floor and an upper mezzanine of about 70m<sup>2</sup>. Usually a family with one or two children is living in one unit, bigger families have two units. The details of each interior were designed with slightly different adjustments to each individual’s life.*

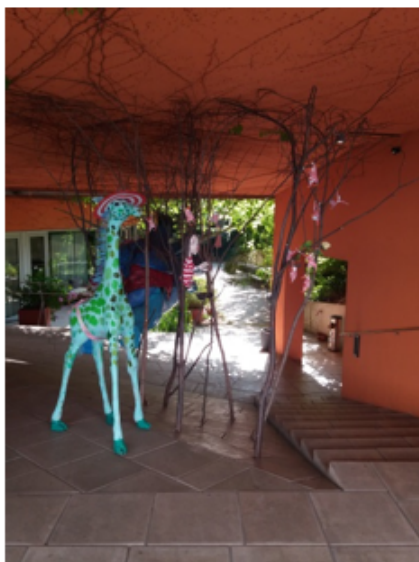
*“I’ve heard building contractors saying an arcade is nothing more than stress and problems with the renters. But in our case the arcade is a delight” (SF3: architect, 2019).*

Beside the chimney, the other symbol of the building is the “balcony”. This is also an invention of the community. At that time balconies were generally constructed of steel and glass, placed on the facades. Here instead uniquely shaped balconies and an arcade was built, so when people exit their housing unit, they are immediately “immersed in life”.



**Picture 13. Special shaped balconies**  
(picture made by author)

The concept in case of “Miss Sargfabrik” was “separated and connected”. Here the flats are much smaller. Instead of erecting partitions and squeezing the required floor area into a fixed order, BKK-3 separated spaces in many of the apartments by using abrupt changes of level in the ceiling and floor, by introducing steps and ramps. The units are connected to each other by a steeply upward-curving ramp.



**Picture 14. Separated and connected**  
(picture made by author)

### 3.2 Adaptive reuse

*"This is an urban planning of shortcuts. We have our own kindergarten, event hall, library, laundry ... much-much more than in a normal housing" (SF3: architect, 2019)*

The main focus of the design of adaptive reuse was communal activity. Before, this was a typical craft-building, with a production hall in the front and apartments for the workers in the back. Now it is a housing complex for living, working and recreation. The property area is 2747 m<sup>2</sup>, while the communal spaces count to 2000 m<sup>2</sup>.



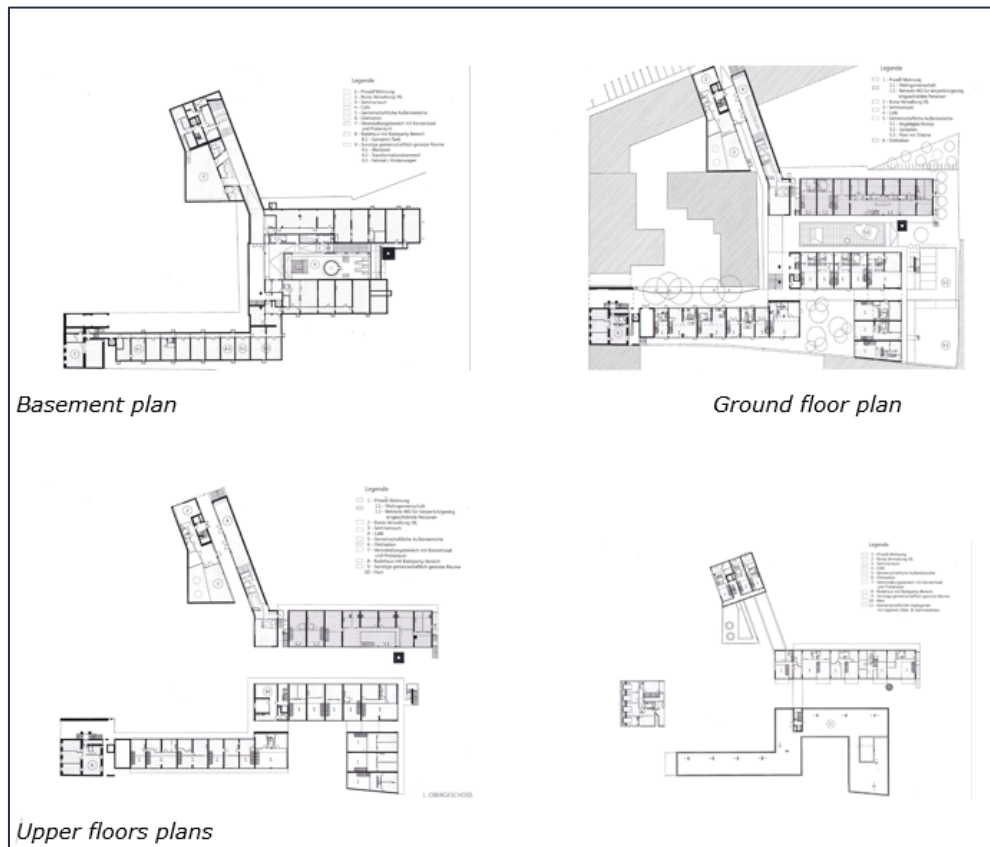
**Picture 15. Public spaces (Source: <https://issuu.com/nushratj/docs/sargfabrik-booklet>)**

The public or semi-public character of the site was an important element in the architectural concept. Entering the site from the Goldschlagstrasse one first passes a café. The access to the seminar rooms lies close to the café, they occupy the ground floor and a mezzanine level. After the coffee shop we pass through a spacious foyer and then the bathing house. The first open space contains a large water basin, with the old, white painted brickwork chimney in the centre of it. The path becomes narrower or wider, depending on the site boundaries. If we go further we arrive to an almost square courtyard with trees and a green garden

area. Few steps further there is a playground divided in two parts, one for smaller children and one football/basketball field for the bigger ones. On levels one and two, there are open galleries in front of each apartment.



**Picture 16. Before and after re-use**  
(pictures made by author)



**Picture 17.** Sargfabrik architectural plans (Source: BKK-3)

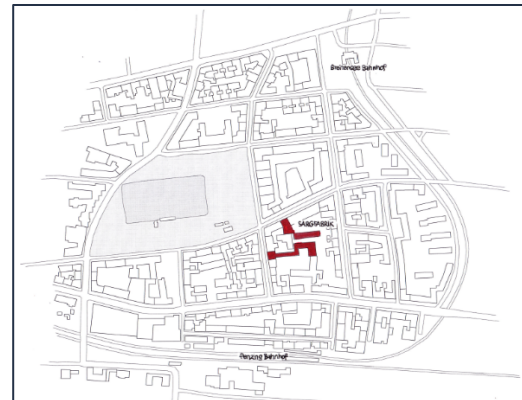
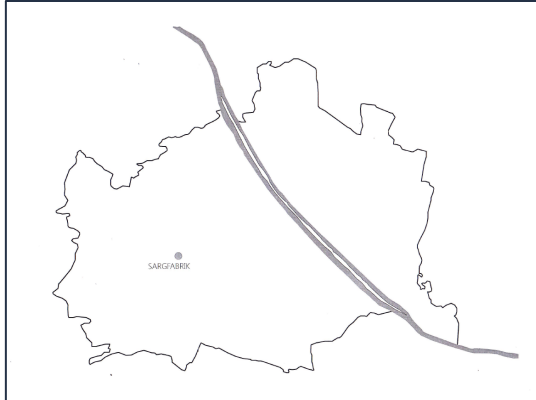
## 4 Context<sup>1</sup>

### 4.1 Geographical and Demographical analysis

Sargfabrik is located in Goldschlagstrasse 169, district 14<sup>th</sup> of Vienna (Penzing). Penzing has an area of 34 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 92 990<sup>2</sup>. More than 60% of its area is green space, this makes Penzing the district with the second largest green area in Vienna. 83% of the green space is forest, but there are also around 200 hectares of meadows and numerous streams and rivers.

<sup>1</sup> Data from <https://www.wien.gv.at/statistik/pdf/bezirke-im-fokus-14.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.citypopulation.de/php/austria-wiencity.php?cid=914>



**Picture 18. Urban layout (Source: BKK-3)**

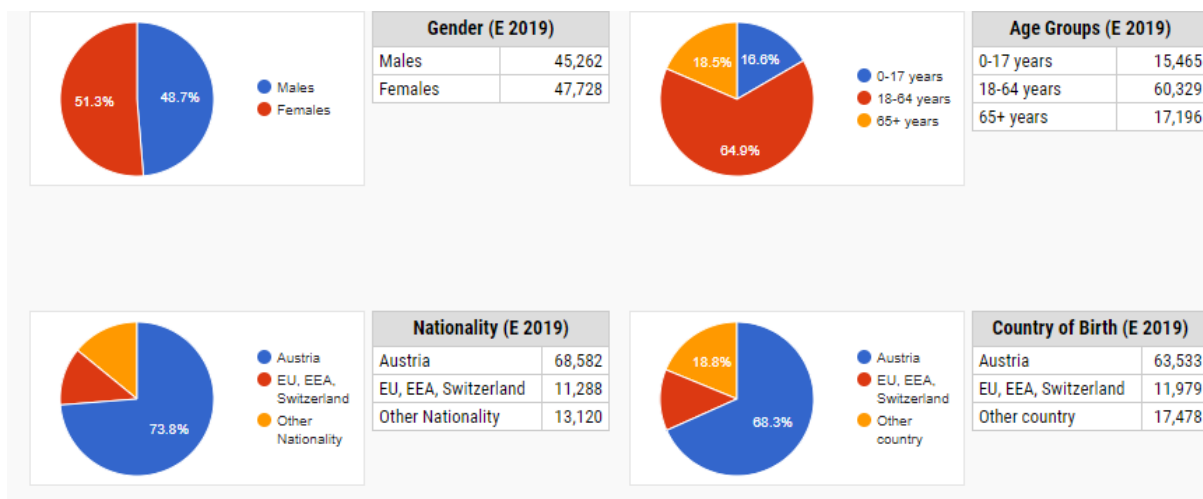
The area used for transport counts only to 9% of the district area (this figure for the whole country is 14%), which is the second lowest value among the Viennese districts. The built-up area is also quite low (29%), with most of it (81%) being residential areas. There are 34 playgrounds and eleven large sports facilities.

There are 44,883 housing units with an average size of 72 m<sup>2</sup>. These units are placed in 12,388 buildings, out of which 7,787 were built after 1945. The average living space per person is 40 square meters. The share of car/person is 0.38 cars, and 34% of Penzinger inhabitants have an annual ticket of the Viennese Lines.

The income in the 14th district is slightly above the Viennese average (22,233 euros/year).

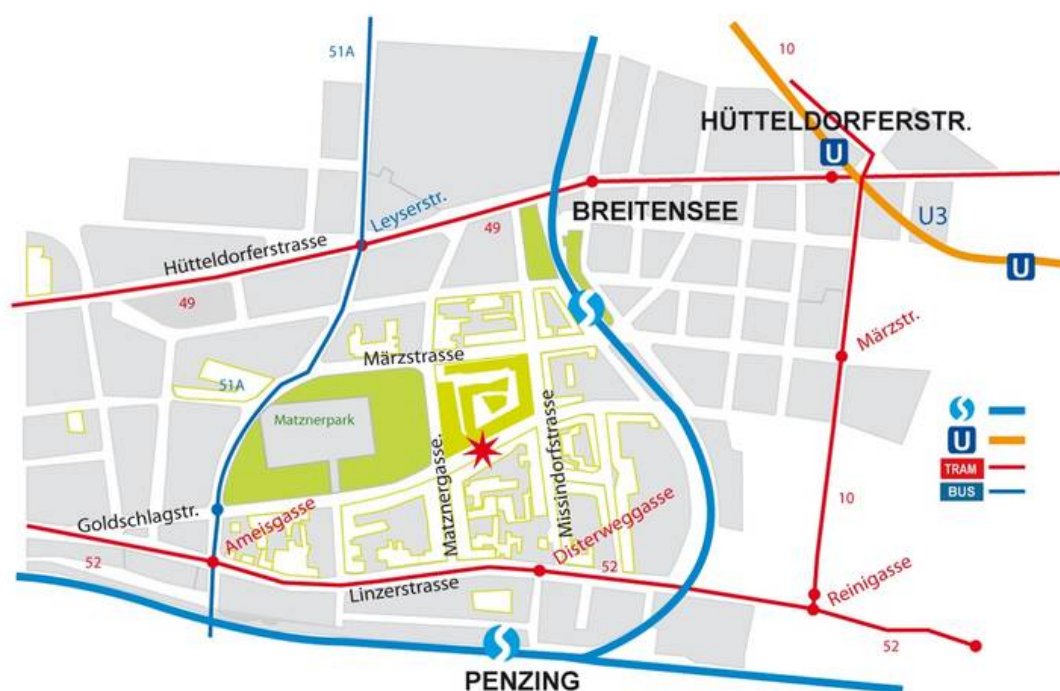
Between 1951 and 1971 the population of Penzing remained unchanged, then until the 21<sup>st</sup> century population losses were registered.

Population in Penzing unchanged and registered until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>. After 2001 the population shows a stronger growth. For the coming years a weak population increase (up to 3%) is expected due to the immigration from other parts of the country and from foreign countries.



**Picture 19. Population structure Penzing**

The close neighbourhood of Sargfabrik is Matzner quarter (Matznerviertel). The Matzner quarter includes the Matznerpark and Goldschlagstraße and its borders are Hütteldorfer Straße in the north, the Westbahn in the south, Ameisgasse in the west and the S-Bahn-line in the east.



**Picture 20. Matzner quarter (Source: <https://matznerviertel.at/unser-leitbild/>)**

The quarter has undergone through major changes in the last 20 years - from a former district of factories and workers it became a place of diverse uses. Originally there were houses built in the 19th century with family businesses (small factories). In a typical building there were the housing units in the front and production halls/workshops behind them. During the 70s-80s most of these businesses went bankrupt, so the buildings became available to purchase, to re-build or to renovate. Most of the houses were totally torn down and new buildings were erected. Another popular solution was that they put rooftops on the old houses. In this way, expensive houses were created, but due to the specific features of the housing subsidies in Vienna, these houses still have a mixed population (usually people with lower income live in the basement and very rich people on the top).

Nowadays, there are some attractive open spaces as well as car-dominated, noisy and dangerous zones. However, streets are still monotonous, the one- and two-storey houses with gardens and open spaces have been replaced with higher buildings and the area is becoming like an ordinary big-city district. Recently an association was established, called the "Lebenswertes Matzner Viertel", which is a platform of dedicated residents, entrepreneurs and employees from the neighborhood who are seeking to upgrade the public space in the area. Sargfabrik plays a crucial role in this initiative.

When the Sargfabrik project started, this area was considered as a periphery, but the initiators did not mind it, since these type of sites were available only on the periphery and anyway *"all the interesting things were outside the downtown"* (SF9:Board member, 2019). The public transportation connections to the downtown were also quite poor at the beginning. The situation changed significantly in 1998, when the U3 metro line was completed.



**Picture 21.**

**Goldschlagstraße (picture  
made by author)**

## 4.2 Policies and regulation

The success of the Sargfabrik is indivisible from the general housing policy and urban development environment of the city of Vienna. The Viennese municipality uses housing development as a way to support urban renewal, urban development and equity within the city. These circumstances, the generous housing subsidies available for constructing buildings, made it possible for the Association, who did not receive any special support, to realize the Sargfabrik project and allowed its middle to lower-middle income members to successfully apply for bank credits, and to complete the construction process.

***The provision of housing in Austria** has traditionally been a strongly prioritized area with complex arrangements, whereby support has not only been given to social housing or only to public stakeholders. Rather, a wide array of housing arrangements have been subsidized, and public authorities are involved in the process at various (national, regional and local) levels. Owners, private developers, the construction sector and credit institutions are also part of the stakeholder system. Regarding the financing, spending on housing and other aspects of urban planning has been overwhelming financed by national resources. The specific subsidy forms have changed over the years, but construction subsidies, direct subsidies and even tax breaks are among the forms, although the latter to a smaller extent. Importantly, privately rented, owner occupied dwellings receive subsidies as well, creating a well-functioning and inclusive market for affordable housing for people with different income levels, where the income threshold is set so high that it is way above the poverty line. This has been a key to the creation of social mix in municipal and subsidized buildings. (Reinprecht 2007)*

The municipality is very proud of its achievements, and it clearly states that “The City of Vienna is known for its special focus on social dimension in urban housing far beyond mere economic criteria.” (Magistrat der Stadt Wien 2016) As a result, in Vienna more than 60 per cent of the residents live in homes that are in some way subsidized. About half of the units, approximately 220,000, are owned directly by the municipal housing company, Wiener Wohnen, which is as a result the biggest public landlord in Europe. There are approximately another 200,000 that are owned by associations and cooperatives and receive subsidies from the public sector for maximizing their rents. (Ball 2019; Makris 2018)

Alternative housing projects, similar to the Sargfabrik can thrive under the conditions created by the City of Vienna. On the one hand there are the socially sensitive and socially responsible housing projects, like the ones carried out in the framework of the HabiTAT group ([https://habitat.servus.at/?page\\_id=608](https://habitat.servus.at/?page_id=608)). The group has three projects (two established and one in the making) in Vienna, and they all specifically target people interested in innovative, communal housing solutions. HabiTAT follows the example and model of the German Miethäusersyndikat, does so by lowering the expenses, and creating a financial model, where collaborating and sustainable living arrangements are within the

reach of lower income households.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Vienna is also full of initiatives also for the middle-classes, often-led by architectural firms, that try to establish a more community-centered and sustainable living style in the city.<sup>4</sup>

An area, where these initiatives are abundant is Aspern Seestadt, the site of a big municipal-led urban development project that tries to create a futuristic city in the fringes of Vienna. A city within the city, but reachable with public transportation, Aspern Seestadt is expected to provide housing for approximately 20.000 by 2028, matched by equal number of workplaces. It is a political project not only in a sense that the city tries to realise many of the smart city ideas conceived, but also that it supports community development, identity building and sustainability together.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, identity building and urban development as supported by the municipality's policies are also exemplified by the rebuilding and redevelopment of the Kabelwerk<sup>6</sup> area. The first of its kind done by the municipality of Vienna, that redevelopment process took place between 2004 and 2010. In many ways there is a close resemblance to what happened in case of the Sargfabrik, but the scale was much bigger. The activities meant the complete transformation of a desolate industrial area, but while keeping the intangible heritage alive and maintaining the identity. Today home to approximately a thousand new dwellings available for people with mixed incomes through the different subsidy systems, the development treasured identity and local history, and took place in close cooperation with the local community. Serving as an example for developments to come later, the realisation was preceded by years of collective work, starting as early as 1996. This long process, just like in case of the Sargfabrik, allowed all stakeholders to find appropriate and satisfying solutions.

## 5 The model

### 5.1 "Wohnheim"

One key aspect of the Sargfabrik project was defining the building as "Wohnheim" (dorm, or residential home). The Association (VIL) acts as the owner, constructor, operator and rental agency of the housing complex.

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<sup>3</sup> This is an important goal, as the collaborative projects tend to be inhabited by better off and more educated residents. See among others the article by Jakobsen and Larsen (2018) on the Danish co-housing scene.

<sup>4</sup> For these projects it is a good start to look at the webpage <https://www.einszueins.at/>, that showcases some examples delivered by a local architectural firm.

<sup>5</sup> Among the sign of the conscious identity building are the street names – they are named after women. For more details, see Hunt 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Magistrat der Stadt Wien n.d.

*Initially, the **Wohnheim model** was designed for student accommodation or homes for elderly. By the Sargfabrik project this model has been adopted for the purpose of living collectively and turned into a sort of cooperative within the framework of Viennese housing provision. This specific organizational legal form provides a resident group access to housing subsidies, yet only for the construction and not for housing allowances. Moreover, the Wohnheim offers a number of exclusions from the general building regulations. These exceptions from several building codes contribute to lower building costs that could be re-invested into the social infrastructure of the project.*

Through the choice of this legal form special subsidies of the city of Vienna could be claimed for educational, social and cultural activities (WWBF, Wiener Wohnbauförderung). Other advantage of this solution is that many building regulations do not count. Operators were allowed to build for example parking facilities in the proportion of 1:10 instead of the 1:1 rule (meaning that they one car park for ten households). Instead of building an underground car park, they saved money for communal facilities. Three out of 11 car parks are now used for car-sharing, the rest is filled with bicycles. As tenants stressed out, they did not need so many parking places, because even at the very beginning they preferred to use bicycles.

This model also allowed the share of public operating space up to 25%.

This model also raises some so-called “security aspects” related to owning a property. This type of security is not present in such a rental-apartment project where no ownership is involved. However, residents feel that in a way this model still make them owners. They possess a large piece of valuable real estate and there is an agreement about how they can retrieve the equity they have invested. So Association members do not consider collective ownership as an unsecure venture. Moreover, they see Sargfabrik rather as an enterprise, in contrast to conventional housing, holding both entrepreneurial and proprietorial responsibility.

*“We are interested in people that keep the spirit of the project – it works like this because people put their heart and soul in it” (SF9: Board member, 2019).*

Through this model the Association can keep control over the “spirit” of the project. There are very strict rules and a complex scanning process for those who want to move in.

## 5.2 Organizational structure

Sargfabrik is the biggest self-administered housing and cultural project in Austria. The association members live in the flats and their rights and obligations are detailed in an internal contract, like in a cooperative. The members pay a “rent”, most of which goes for the repayment of the mortgage. They also contribute to the administrative and maintenance costs of the building (operation of the bathing house and the institutions, contribution to the social fund, etc.). In the case of moving out, members return the flat to the association.

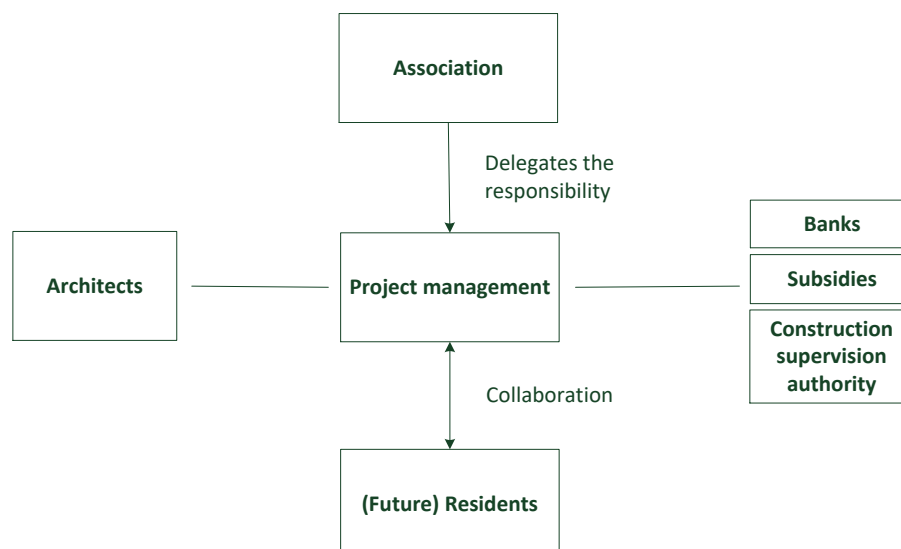
Because of the autonomous status of the Association, over the years occupants could take over a lot of responsibilities and were allowed to participate in the planning process. For instance, they could influence the architecture plans, the materials used, the inside design - so each flat has its own style.

The association has a special model of households and builders. From the very beginning, two architects of BKK-2 were part of the group which initiated the project, they are members of the Association and they live in Sargfabrik. The office of BKK-3 is situated in Miss Sargfabrik. The participatory planning with the addition of the personal incentives and involvement of the architects resulted in a design process which is quite unusual on the competitive market.

The project has a professional project management team consisting of 16 people (two Association members are full-time employees of this team), with a responsible person for each branch of activity (facility management, public relations, culture house, kindergarten, bathing house, seminar room, etc.)

Important decisions, such as statutes, standing orders, business plan, annual planning, budget, flat allocation, rules of use etc. are discussed twice a year on the General Assembly. The general assembly elects six board members (they are acting on voluntary basis). The Board appoints a professional executive director for implementing the yearly work plans and managing all departments. In order to keep the discussions focused, the Board prepares the proposals very thoroughly before presenting them to the GA. The decision-making is supported by the trust between the members, on the principle that *"no one works for its own benefit"* (SF9: Board member, 2019).

Beside the two big General Assemblies there are around ten-twelve smaller meetings a year focusing on particular issues.



**Picture 22. Organizational structure**

## 5.3 Financing

The financing of the project had two major elements: purchasing the site and financing the building costs. The price of the site was 1 million euro. This was financed by a mortgage, but in a very special way. The original community contributed with 250.000 euro (35 people were involved in this action, each of them paid around 7300 euro - ca. 100.000 schilling that time). This was the collateral for the loan, as the Association itself had no money that time. The maturity of the loan was 25 years.

The total construction costs amounted to 13,6 million euro. This was financed from three sources: (1) the Association received an 5,8 million euro support from the City of Vienna (Wohnbauförderungsmittel) – those days any Wohnheim-type project was eligible for this grant; (2) a long-term bank loan of 5,3 million euro (with 20 years maturity – by now this is already paid back by the association) and (3) 2,5 million euros as the own contribution of the owners <sup>7</sup>(the “equity”). In 1995 this was 660euro/sqm, but according to the indexing process applied by the Association, the value of the equity in 2016 was around 1000 euro/sqm.

As Sargfabrik is not just a residential building, but a professional NGO, they also have incomes and expenditures related to the services they provide. As they are a non-profit organization, they make only very little turnover. For most of their activities they get support from the City of Vienna or the Federal government, but they also generate income from fees (kindergarten, cultural house, seminar room, etc.).

The level of the rents is quite low, especially considering the facilities available for the inhabitants. The total amount of the rent is around 8,45 euro/sqm, which is half of the rent paid in the neighbouring houses. Around 30% of the rent goes for the repayment of the loan, the rest covers some general costs of the building (the operation of the bathing house, insurance, hot water and heating, institution support, renovation fund, social fund and maintenance costs).

## 6 Impacts

### Long waiting lists

The “Sargfabrik” is a special model for urban housing. Its success can be proven by very long waiting lists. Currently around 600 people are on the waiting list, being interested to move into Sargfabrik. In fact, there is rarely any vacancy in

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<sup>7</sup> This amount was on top of the 7300 euros per person they already contributed to the collateral

Sargfabrik. People are usually emotionally attached to this building and community, and they live here until they die. In Miss Sargfabrik, due to the lower size of the apartments (and kind of a lower reputation), the fluctuation is higher. Those, who want to live in the Sargfabrik have to fill in a questionnaire, and then they are scanned by a group formed of Association members. The potential newcomers are usually asked the questions “*Why do you want to live here*” and “*Why do you think we want you to live here*”?

### Bringing vitality to the neighbourhood

The Bathing House, the Concert Hall, the kindergarten, the open cultural events and the lifestyle represented by this community turned out to be very popular attractions in the District and vitalised the surroundings (especially the very close surrounding, the Matzner quarter). Programs and facilities at Sargfabrik are provided for all age groups. Also, some members of the Association are actively involved and play a leading role in the revitalization of Matzner district.



**Picture 23. Vitalizing the neighbourhood (Source: BKK-3)**

### Gentrification

*"We cannot buy any site here, because the success of our project. We grew up our own gentrification project"* (SF3: architect, 2019)

Twenty years ago, the west of Vienna was still a factory district of workers, and Sargfabrik was the first project to bring the concept of experimental living. Today, there are many high-quality residential groups nearby, so the self-organized business model has also led many new communities that are effective in organizing themselves and bringing vitality into the area. Now everybody is advertising the area with the Sargfabrik project, and the sites in the neighbourhood became quite expensive.

### Trendsetting model

Sargfabrik is not just a building for living, but also for meeting, communication, recreation. It became a trendsetting model for an urban and modern way of living. It has hundreds of visitors every year: students, architects, living communities, experts of housing and social activities are all interested in the projects and the keys of success. Asking many people living in the building complex, the answer was always the same: *"the key of success is people, open communication and collaboration."*

## 7 Future challenges

*"Back then, people had little money and lots of ideas. Now, they have much more money...but still many ideas"* (SF9: Board member, 2019)

One of the specifics of the project is that it is never completed, there are always new goals, new ideas, new challenges. Seven years ago there was a GA dedicated to "The future of Sargfabrik", where a record number of Association members showed up to re-think the future and develop new project ideas. Another big meeting with the focus on the future is planned for November 2019.

One of the most urgent issues is to think about how to finance the building when it gets older, how to keep it in good condition.

It is also the moment, when the interest of the Association is different than the interest of the individual people. The Association also need to look at the big picture. Most of the original inhabitants are getting old, their children left, but they still live in big apartments and do not want to move out. The Association is trying to find an adequate solution which serves everyone's satisfaction.

It also needs to be considered how they can change their regulations to avoid that those who want to stay pay the part of those who want to move out. As mentioned earlier, when someone leaves, the Association has to pay back their personal equity. At the beginning they created a system where interest is paid on the personal equities. Normally, the interest should be discounted with the depreciation of the apartment. However, they wanted to encourage the growth of the personal equity. The idea was that the property would accrue value and that everyone should profit from this added value. But they did not consider that the building is naturally aging and there will be a need for new infusion of funds to renovate it. This was an error in planning.

The Sargfabrik model doesn't provide security for the youth either. When the first generation moved in, there were several children of similar age. They could get together on a daily basis, they were raised among adults with different behavioural pattern and different lifestyles, but always in a very supportive ambiance. However, the youth cannot afford to stay here because their parents are not allowed to pass on the apartment to them. The apartments cannot be inherited. If

they want to live here, they would have to go through the screening process as anyone from the outside.

During the mentioned GA, the Association discussed 17 new project ideas, including activities to reduce the ecological footprint of the building. to solve the situation of the inhabitants getting older, and also to strengthen the embeddedness of the community into the neighbourhood. In fact, there is a consensus that many things have been achieved inside Sargfabrik, now it is time to think about how the surroundings could and should be improved. VIL members would like to play a pro-active role in revitalizing the neighbourhood through a participatory process.

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## Interviews

SF1: office manager (2019, 22-05-2019) *Interview with an employee in the project management team (Interviewer: Hanna Szemző and Andrea Tönkö)*

SF2: Board member (2019, 22-05-2019) *Interview with a member of the Board, responsible for Communication (Interviewer: Hanna Szemző and Andrea Tönkö)*

SF3: architect (2019, 28-06-2019) *Interview with an architect (BKK-3), involved in designing Sargfabrik and Miss Sargfabrik (Interviewer: Andrea Tönkö)*

SF4: canteen project manager (2019, 27-06-2019) *Interview with the project manager of the Café-Restaurant Sargfabrik, operated by Der Kümmerei (Interviewer: Andrea Tönkö)*

SF5: cultural and financial manager (2019, 28-06-2019) *Interview with an employee in the project management team, responsible for financial and cultural issues (Interviewer: Andrea Tönkö)*

SF6: teenager tenant (2019, 28-06-2019) *Interview with a teenager living in Sargfabrik with her parents (Interviewer: Andrea Tönkö)*

SF7: member of Association (2019, 28-06-2019) *Interview with a member and founder of the Association, involved in the project and living in Sargfabrik from the very beginning (Interviewer: Andrea Tönkö)*

SF8: educator (2019, 16-06-2019) *Interview with an employee in the Children's House (Interviewer: Andrea Tönkö)*

SF9: Board member (2019, 09-07-2019) *Interview with a member of the Board, responsible for Communication (Interviewer: Andrea Tönkö)*