

Observatory Case update

Sargfabrik, Vienna, Austria

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Sargfabrik

Sargfabrik is a collaborative housing project with social and cultural mission, focusing on integration and social equality both among its residents and in its wider neighbourhood. It is situated in the 14th district in Vienna, and 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. Sargfabrik has a professional management and several supervisor bodies that are involved in the every-day operation. <https://sargfabrik.at/>

During the Covid-19 pandemic, life in Sargfabrik changed significantly. People worked from home, and they spent their entire day in the building complex. The roof garden – which was a popular place even before the pandemic – became the main meeting point of the residents and – as there was nothing open in the city, especially during the first lock down – the roof garden it made the lack of “moving out” tolerable. In this situation, the advantages of collaborative housing became even more obvious, especially on the field of mutual assistance. If someone got sick, they received a lot of help from the community, there was constant sharing of news and attention to each other. They even worked together in the field of cooking – the families cooked in a rotation system.

On the institutional side, there were more difficulties. The Concert Hall, the bath and the seminar room and the restaurant was closed. The Kindergarten was open, but only with a very small number of children (usually 5-6 per day). The Sargfabrik office was not totally closed, one person was there every day (in a rotation system). All the meetings and assemblies went online, which was a very difficult and unpopular move. These meetings are “the heart” of the Sargfabrik project from the very beginning, and for some residents it was very difficult to adjust to the new circumstances.

From an economic and financial point of view, the project survived this difficult period, thanks to the several city and state subsidies. First of all, the Kurzarbeit¹ helped many employees, so the Sargfabrik didn't have to fire anybody. The restaurant switched to home delivery and takeaway, and these services turned out to be very popular among the neighborhood. The Concert Hall was closed, but the Association got subsidy from the Municipality and the Cultural Ministry to purchase the technological tools (camera, microphones, speakers, etc.) for digitalization, so they livestreamed the concerts, generating income from the fees. This service

¹ Kurzarbeit is a governmental unemployment insurance system in which private sector employees agree to or are forced to accept a reduction in working time and pay, with the state making up for all or part of the lost wages

was also popular, however, it didn't go smoothly every time, due to the instability of the internet connection.

The Association also got subsidy for developing the visual design of the project. During the long months of lockdown, they finally had the time to re-design the project logo, the website, the promotion materials, etc.

Overall, Sargfabrik survived the Covid-19 pandemic without serious economic losses, and without a need to significantly increase the rents of the residents. However, the utility bills are rising drastically, and this makes the management to think about alternative business models. Although the project is characterized by ecologically friendly design and optimized energy consumption (green electricity, composting, solar water heating, etc.), the building has a district heating and some services (especially the bath) have relatively high energy demand. The future in this regard is quite unpredictable, the plans are vague yet, but the Association is aware that there might be a need to make changes in their operation.