

# VinziRast Mittendrin

A space for humanity  
from 2011

Währingerstrasse, 19  
1090 Wien  
Austria

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VinziRast Mittendrin is an innovative social housing project where former homeless people, refugees and students live: a heterogeneous community of people with different life stories, cultures and of various age groups, who live together sharing experiences and enriching each other's lives, encouraging diversity in the city and offering a different perspective on society. This initiative, a pilot project in the field of communal living, was born in 2009 on the occasion of the student protest movement "Uni Brennt", during which students occupied the Vienna Audimax, Vienna's largest auditorium. During the occupation, some of the students came into contact with homeless people who were also present in the auditorium of the main university. After the end of the occupation, they agreed to create a project together. They located an empty building in the 9<sup>th</sup> district of Vienna, where they eventually founded a communal living space, with the support of investor and longtime VinziRast supporter Hans-Peter Haselsteiner, who had suggested the project to VinziRast founder Cecily Corti. The project offers residents, as well as other homeless people, the opportunity to work together, create new connections, regain confidence in themselves and trust in others, and find an extra source of income. The project offers residents, as well as other homeless people, the opportunity to work together, create new connections, regain confidence in themselves and trust in others, and find an extra source of income. The building provides spaces and meeting opportunities: besides the shared living spaces, there is a restaurant, Lokal Mittendrin, as well as two event venues and several workspaces. VinziRast Mittendrin is one of the projects run by Vinzenzgemeinschaft St. Stephan, a 95% volunteer-run organization founded in 2003 by Cecily Corti to offer support and hospitality to homeless people in Vienna. Today, the organization promotes various projects with the goal of giving refugees and former homeless people a second lease on life.



## WHERE

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VinziRast Mittendrin is located in a very central area of Vienna (“mitten-drin” actually means “in the middle of everything”), the Alsergrund district. The building that hosts the project is an example of Biedermeier-style architecture. The original building was renovated, with the addition of another floor on which a rooftop studio and a large rooftop garden were created. Following the principles of environmental sustainability, many of the original materials were recovered and reused for the interiors. The renovation, which only received preliminary funding from the city administration, was completed mainly through donations and volunteer labor, an element that still characterizes the entire project.

### LOCATION

Urban

### TYPE OF SPACE

Building

### ORIGINAL FUNCTION

Commercial  
Residential

### YEAR OF CONSTRUCTION

First half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

### SURFACE AREA

1,500 sqm

### OWNERSHIP

Private

### CONCESSION

Owned by the managing organization

### CONDITION BEFORE ACTIVATION

Vacant

### COMPOSITION OF THE SPACE

Ten communal apartments with three small private rooms, washrooms and mini-kitchens

Common areas: Communal kitchens, common living rooms and terraces on each floor  
Verandas in front of each common kitchen  
Offices  
Study rooms  
Library  
Large event space  
Restaurant  
Workshops areas  
Rooftop garden

## WHEN

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### TIME OF DAY USED

Morning ..... 7am - 1pm 40%  
Afternoon ... 1pm - 7pm 40%  
Evening ..... 7pm - 1am 20%  
Night ..... 1am - 7am 0%

Workdays 90%

Weekends 10%

## WHAT

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VinziRast Mittendrin is made up of three distinct projects: the social housing project, VinziRast-Lokal-Mittendrin and VinziRast-Chance.

- Social housing: a project unique to Europe, in which a group of 26 people, composed of students, refugees and formerly homeless people from more than 10 different countries, live in shared apartments and work together regardless of age, cultural background, religious beliefs or sexual orientation. A meeting place that offers access to communal spaces and workshop areas.

- VinziRast Lokal Mittendrin: the ground floor hosts a restaurant that is jointly run by volunteers and former and current residents of the housing project.

- VinziRast Chance: a project started in 2014 and developed with the help of volunteers, offering support and

hospitality to 12–15 asylum seekers. The project offers German language courses and the possibility to use workrooms, a wood workshop, a sewing workshop and an upcycling workshop, where asylum seekers design and produce unique items together.

#### **SURFACE IN USE**

1,500 sqm

#### **THEMATIC AREAS**

Commercial  
Design, crafts and production  
Education and training  
Food and drink  
Housing  
Welfare

#### **USER DEMOGRAPHIC**

Young people  
Under-represented people: asylum seekers and refugees, homeless people, migrants, poor people

#### **COLLABORATIONS**

Artists and creatives  
Companies  
Professionals and freelancers

#### **NETWORK**

Local  
National  
International

Vinzenzgemeinschaft St. Stephan, the organization that runs VinziRast Mitterdrin, is part of the international secular volunteer organization Vincentian Community (Vissen Gemeinschaft).

### **Did you know?**

#### **The Vincentian Community (Vissen Gemeinschaft)**

The Vincentian Community is the largest secular volunteer organization in the world, with over 60,000 communities and more than one million active members spread across every continent. It was founded by Frederic Ozanam (1813–1853), a law professor in Paris, in response to social injustice and inspired by Saint Vincent de Paul (1581–1660).

The actions of the Vincentian Community are very varied and, of course, highly dependent on the type of poverty and the necessities of those in need. In principle, any member of the community – regardless of profession, education or religious belief – can volunteer to offer as many resources as possible to people in need.

## WHO

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VinziRast Mittendrin is a single space managed by two legal entities. The Social Housing project and the hospitality project VinziRast Chance are managed by the NGO Vinzenzgemeinschaft St. Stephan and its volunteers, while the Lokal Mittendrin restaurant is completely independent in terms of management and accounting.

### MANAGING ORGANIZATION(S)

1. Vinzenzgemeinschaft St. Stephan (NGO, 2003)

### PEOPLE INVOLVED IN THE MANAGEMENT

6 employees  
90-100 volunteers

## HOW

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The management of VinziRast Mittendrin includes a board of management (responsible for financing and strategic planning), a chairwoman, a Manager (responsible for all business matters of the organization) and a Lenkungsgruppe or Steering committee (a small decision-making structure for the single projects).

### NATURE OF THE INITIATIVE

Codesigned: the organization was created upon the initiative of a single person but has been developed by volunteers

### TYPE OF MANAGEMENT

Vertical

### ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY

Donations  
Rental income

### TYPE OF ACTIVITIES

100% Free



VinziRast

*mittendrin*

1150 Wien



## How did your story begin?

The project was born after the student protests of 2009 against the severe limitations on access to study introduced by the government. During the weeks of protest many buildings were occupied (including the Vienna auditorium) and the students ended up living with some homeless people who had joined the protests. After this positive experience, the group began asking for spaces where the newly formed community could continue this sharing experience. Their request attracted the interest of the industrialist Hans Peter Haselsteiner, who in turn involved the non-governmental organization Vinzenzgemeinschaft St. Stephan in managing the entire implementation of the idea and specifically the whole community project. The building that hosts VinziRast Mittendrin was located by students and was empty at the time. It was purchased and renovated by the Gaupenraub+/- architecture studio, with the help of many volunteers. The homeless were directly involved in the renovation process, taking charge of several manual activities until the opening of 2015.

“The presence of elements of stability in a group is useful, and social mixity is such an element, because it distracts people from their personal problems in their everyday life”.

### **Is there a practice or value that represents you and you think may be an inspiration to others?**

VinziRast Mittendrin’s social housing is certainly a key project because it is rare to see communities as diverse

as the one at VinziRast Mittendrin. This experience allows people to learn from each other, it offers different opportunities and provides many social benefits. We are very fortunate that organizations keep visiting us to learn and study our initiative. We are especially happy when we can inspire others to develop similar projects and I hope that many valuable new initiatives like ours will emerge in the coming years. Inclusion is an important aspiration of our work. The reason why we don’t offer services to just one target group – let’s say exclusively to formerly homeless people or exclusively to refugees, for example – but create diversity in the mix is that it brings so many benefits to the community. For example, we find it hypocritical to house traumatized people in cramped quarters on the outskirts of the city. This lays the ground for overstrain, conflict and crises. However, if we mix the group and this new diversity becomes the norm in everyday life, then different people from different backgrounds enrich each other’s lives enormously. Those who may have less emotional stability or are going through a crisis will find support and security, while there is always also something they can bring to the community. Learning German is so much easier in a diverse group. So if everyone is dedicated to the community, resources and social skills and opportunities are brought together and integrated for the benefit of everyone involved.

## What is the secret ingredient that makes your story unique?

Three elements come to mind: dedication, responsibility and flexibility. Dedication is at the heart of all our projects, because we work with very diverse and heterogeneous people and we have to be present and able to adjust, especially in situations of conflict. You have to be creative and attentive to be able to guide and support others. We believe it is important to take them as they are, accept them, not to judge them. We never know what roads they have traveled and how they have formed their beliefs. We try to approach each person with openness and empathy and take the wishes and ideas they have concerning their life as the measure of things, even if they may differ from our own world view. We try to be there for the volunteers as well, because they bring their own ideas, try new things and make their own mistakes. It is important that they feel self-sufficient and that they feel like they are part of the big picture, that they can identify with the organization. Finally, of course, we need to be flexible because circumstances can change quickly. The fact that we work with many volunteers and that many people also get to know us by joining in volunteer work, strengthens our public image. People tend to like to donate to organizations like ours that rely on volunteers and receive no public funding, but have little administrative overhead. Since we do not work with a public administration, we have relatively little bureaucracy to comply with.



*Interview with: Renate Hornstein*

### Did you know?

#### Vienna's unique social housing program

The city of Vienna holds several records: it is the largest property owner in Europe (about 220,000 apartments are owned by the administration) and 62% of its inhabitants live in municipal or subsidized housing. More importantly, Wien has been one of the top cities in the quality of life indexes for decades, and one of the reasons for its success certainly lies in housing policies, which historically represent the pride and glory of the municipal administration. The roots of this extraordinarily innovative policy lie within the interwar "Red Vienna" period, when thousands of municipal dwellings were built. The aim was to provide affordable homes of good quality, giving people access to "light, fresh air and sunshine", while also providing them with all the social infrastructures and communal facilities. The idea of a "house for everyone" is still at the heart of Vienna's urban policies: rents and land prices are not completely controlled by the free market, because housing is considered a public responsibility and part of general interest services. The housing policies, which today have been extended to the middle classes of the population, include measures to ensure quality homes at controlled prices: open competition between builders, architects and experts; purchase of land at controlled prices; quality construction parameters; attention to the management of the works. Moreover, the city has established four parameters for the evaluation of building projects: Architecture, Economy, Ecology and Sustainability. Finally, the city defines precise objectives to support specific categories of the population (women, migrants, students, etc.) or meet specific requisites (sustainable transportation, wooden buildings, home automation, etc.).