La Biennale di Venezia
19. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura
Partecipazioni Nazionali

AGENCY FOR BETTER LIVING

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AUSTRIAN PAVILION
BIENNALE ARCHITETTURA 2025

CURATORS: SABINE POLLAK,
MICHAEL OBRIST, LORENZO ROMITO

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AGENCY FOR BETTER LIVING

Austrian Contribution to the 19th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia 2025 by Sabine Pollak, Michael Obrist, and Lorenzo Romito

1. PROJECT

The AGENCY FOR BETTER LIVING in the Austrian pavilion at the Biennale Architettura 2025 in Venice focuses on the housing question. The starting point is a housing crisis that is spreading across Europe and around the world. Rents are rising to unbelievable levels, a highly questionable property policy is spreading, municipal housing is disappearing, neighborhoods are being rented out to tourists, and speculative vacancies have become the norm. For a large portion of the population, living in cities is no longer sustainable. Today, housing is a tradable commodity. The question is: What stance will architecture take on this?

This is why the curators Sabine Pollak, Michael Obrist, and Lorenzo Romito are opening the AGENCY FOR BETTER LIVING. They want to explore practices, spaces, and rules for BETTER LIVING, i.e. a better life for everyone, and to show that it is possible to do something about current developments in the area of urban coexistence. The starting point for this is Vienna and its pioneering role in the question of affordable housing for all. Which further “intelligens” can help us to find answers to these fundamental questions in these times of polycrisis?

VIENNA AND ROME

In keeping with the overall theme of the Biennale, “Intelligens. Natural. Artificial. Collective,” one such “intelligens” is expanding, stretching, and further developing the Viennese system of social housing. It is doing so by comparing the city of Vienna with another European city in which self-organized forms of housing and living have emerged as a reaction to the failure of planning processes: Rome.

Both cities, Vienna and Rome, demonstrate different “intelligens” of how things can be done: Vienna is a city that cares, a caring city. In a top-down process, the municipality ensures that everyone who is looking for affordable housing gets it. Rome is the city of ruins, where hard-won, bottom-up processes create informal living spaces with often astonishing forms of self-organization. The Viennese system creates security, the Roman system a reactive and creative civil society. In both cities, innovative ways of living are generated – by very different, if not opposite, processes. Overlaying the two systems, we can imagine a new level of cooperation between planners and inhabitants, which could lead to the emergence of the potential utopia of future urban coexistence and to a strategy for unusual, inclusive, affordable, and climate-friendly forms of living together.

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THE CENTRAL QUESTIONS OF THE CURATORS

The central questions of the AGENCY FOR BETTER LIVING are: How can the “Vienna system” be adapted, i.e. made fit for the future? Which topics will be important in the rapidly growing city? What can it learn from the self-organized forms of urban regeneration in Rome? Could Rome be a model of how to deal with issues relating to existing buildings in the future, even beyond residential typologies? And, conversely, the question arises of how the caring system in Vienna could become a model for future strategies in Rome for dealing with affordable housing. A twofold *learning from* is called for.

EXHIBITION CONCEPT

The exhibition utilizes the symmetry of the pavilion designed by Josef Hoffmann. Visitors enter the now closed passageway and are led into the courtyard. On one side of the pavilion, they experience the Vienna system, on the other the Rome system. Learning from both cities and systems is negotiated in the courtyard of the pavilion, where a platform – the “space of negotiation” – invites discussion and mutual exchange. Both parts of the pavilion begin with films that tell “mythical” stories of the cities and their approach to housing, land policy, and urban space. The two large exhibition rooms present different situations and themes in Vienna and Rome that relate to history, specific places, organizational forms, initiatives, and spaces.

The Vienna system is analyzed on the basis of nine stations: photographs show urban and communal spaces in daily use, accompanied by excerpts from films from various decades. Infographics and diagrams illustrate factors such as Vienna’s comparatively low rents or the structures of certain buildings with specific spatial programs. Current developments are conveyed via new neighborhoods, such as the Sonnwendviertel, the Nordbahnhof area with its Wilde Mitte, and Per Albin-Hansson-Siedlung, as an example of how to deal with existing buildings.

In addition to this, there are topics from the city’s history that have had a strong influence on its extraordinary quality of living, such as the comprehensive gender planning established in 1998. Or individual pioneering projects like the Sargfabrik, a self-organized, experimental residential project that has acted as a role model for housing across Vienna.

The center of the space is occupied by “Megastructure on the Couch,” an item of furniture that can be sat on and stretched out upon and that reinterprets a fundamental aspect of living on the basis of a photograph of a playroom in Wohnpark Alterlaa, an identity-generating residential project from the 1970s.

Rome presents evidence of the struggle for living, adapting, and transforming the ruins of the present, both abandoned places and

planning failures. The modern history of the city is reviewed from this perspective and summarized in a work that tells the story of the struggle for living in the form of “Trajan’s Column.” Seven contemporary examples show various forms of self-organization and resistance by civil society that have shaped different ways of innovative common living. These experiences are represented in the pavilion as a collective narration constructed with and thanks to the many people who animate, build, imagine, inhabit, and share the great world of self-organization and who struggle, day by day, for a BETTER LIVING. This story of their struggle for a BETTER LIVING that they all make possible is summarized in the work that adopts the sculptural form of a fragment of the column.

Lago Bullicante is an example of the co-evolution of a neighborhood community and a spontaneous process of renaturalization of a former viscose factory, where, in 1992, an attempt to illegally build a shopping center resulted in the breaching of the water table and the creation of a natural lake. The efforts of the local community to protect this place from speculation eventually led to this unique natural environment being awarded the status of a nature reserve. Ararat is the informal embassy of the stateless Kurdish community. It has hosted collaboration between social movements, refugees, and artists for a quarter of a century and the spectacular Newroz celebration takes place here every year.

Spin Time, a former public office building, Porto Fluviale, a former military barracks, Metropoliz, a former meat factory, Quarticciolo’s former police station, and 4 Stelle, a never completed hotel, have all been occupied by housing rights movements and now, after a decade of collective inhabiting of these places, some very complex social and spatial shapes have emerged. They are home to a highly innovative coexistence between different cultures and a mix of housing, social, and cultural uses. Spin Time, the only remaining downtown occupation, where around 150 families from 27 countries live together in 21,000 square meters, contains a theater, a museum, after-school care for children, art workshops, social and medical facilities, a barber’s shop, and a restaurant.

A large map of Rome and the “reuse” of a model of Corviale (a housing complex from the 1970s) as an archive of places – both created by the collective Stalker (Rome) in collaboration with IURmap and Scomodo – indicate the location and history of 100 ruins. These have either been renaturalized, occupied as a result of the housing crisis, or used for social and cultural purposes – or they remain abandoned and in search of a potential function.

INSTALLATION IN THE COURTYARD

The plateau in the courtyard invites visitors to take a rest and join the discussion. Here, the agendas for a BETTER LIVING should be negotiated around an open center. The form interprets a kidney-shaped pool that was designed by Josef Hoffmann in 1954 and remained for several years in this position as part of the sculpture garden. The now dry pool is recreated from a loose arrangement of brick, the material from which both Vienna and Rome were built. The bricks, which were

manufactured close to Venice, will be returned to the cycle of housing production following the Biennale.

Plants are set into the plateau. These are climate change “winners,” plants that are able to withstand the temperatures forecast for Vienna and Rome. At 25 m^2, the area of the plateau matches that of a residential unit in the One-Kitchen House and cluster apartments in Vienna or a former office unit in Santa Croce/Spin Time in Rome. This is also the per capita requirement for climate-friendly living space, as long as additional space is available for commons.

PHOTOGRAPHS ARMIN LINKE, COURTYARD
Title: “Position Papers, Places of Planning, and Self-Organization”

A work by the artist Armin Linke (I, DE) is installed in the covered area of the pavilion’s courtyard. The photographic essay was created as a participatory photographic observation during field research in Vienna and Rome (December 2024 - February 2025). It displays photographs of spaces of negotiation, team building, planning, administration, and self-organization. The project explores the complicated dynamics of legal and economic engineering, legal development, community building, exchanging ideas, and social interdependence. In Vienna, for example, the office of the City Councilor for Housing was photographed, as were housing promotion and research offices and the offices of wohnfonds_wien, but also the offices of pioneering projects such as the Sargfabrik or the neunerhaus. In Rome, Armin Linke photographed the process and the places represented in the pavilion but also the planning office and the site at Porto Fluviale, where the collaboration between the municipality and the housing rights movement is becoming reality.

The photographs are mounted on placards reminiscent of those used at demonstrations, such as the numerous demonstrations that have been held during the fight for affordable housing in Rome.

BACKGROUND: VIENNA

The Viennese part of the exhibition was created as a multilayered research project by photographers, graphic designers, filmmakers, and researchers under the direction of Sabine Pollak and Michael Obrist.

Vienna’s housing system is a success story. Vienna has been growing rapidly since the fall of the Iron Curtain, yet life here has remained affordable. Starting with Red Vienna (1919-1934), the city has continued to use effective instruments to combat land speculation and produce affordable social housing. The city still has enough land reserves to build, provide, and operate affordable housing together with building associations and cooperatives, and will continue to do so for decades to come. It owns 220,000 council apartments itself, where around 500,000 people live in open-ended tenancies, and the city has a further 200,000 subsidized apartments. Almost 80 per cent of the population lives in rented accommodation, which is unusual compared with other major European cities.

Social housing is seen in the city as an inclusive model for a large part of society – from the poorer to the middle class. Unlike in other European cities, the city has not given up on housing production and is ensuring that this process will continue to work in the future.

As a result of Vienna's enormous growth, housing production ultimately became urban production. Large areas of new building, spread throughout Vienna, determined its urban planning. Huge, so-called superblocks were built across the city, defining the cityscape and offering a city within the city, with all the necessary additional functions.

Today, the city is facing new challenges such as an ageing society, increasing poverty, new living and working models, the tangible consequences of climate change, new forms of coexistence, and questions about the transformation of the existing city.

BACKGROUND: ROME

The Roman part of the exhibition was created as a multi-layered research project by artists, inhabitants, and researchers under the direction of Giulia Fiocca and Lorenzo Romito.

Today's Rome piques our interest less through its planned responses to global challenges and more through its unpredictable and creative reactions to the errors and failures of (public) initiatives. In its struggle for survival, new structures arise from the practices of appropriating, reusing, and reinventing public and private projects that have ended up in ruins. These emerging landscapes of spontaneous natural and social reappropriation offer a fragile yet unique perspective on urban regeneration. Spaces marked by diversity and resilience, they prove to be places of refuge that generate social and ecological adaptation strategies. Spontaneous reforestation promotes biodiversity; new spaces for the revitalization of civil and democratic coexistence are created: indispensable hubs for the regeneration of the city – resilient, creative, yet permanently threatened by external intervention.

This bottom-up process of regenerating places that have lost their original function can play a part in the evolution of forms of living. This reinhabiting of the ruins of modernity, driven by needs and desires that society does not satisfy, allows the emergence of the unpredictable ecological and social relationships that we need today to address the transition that we are experiencing. The encounter between these living experiences and the institutional project could restore Rome to its position as the World-City, as a city in which many different cultures rediscover each other in all their rich diversity.

2. PROGRAM

Between late May and November, a program of workshops and presentations will take place in the Austrian Pavilion. During these events, visitors to the Biennale and invited experts will negotiate the conditions for a future BETTER LIVING. The events will be documented and accessible online.

Sessions addressing the following issues are already planned: Theories of Better Living, Decision Making and Politics, Economy, Gender Planning and Feminism, New Typologies, Practices of Transformation, Ecology and Tourism.

Information about the latest program can be found at:
https://labiennale2025.at/en/program/

The supporting program is kindly financed by MA 50 City of Vienna, Department for Housing Promotion and Arbitration Board for Legal Housing Matters.

3. STATEMENTS

“The Architecture Biennale in Venice is one of the world’s best-known architecture exhibitions and one of the most important platforms for the international architectural debate and for addressing significant subjects in the field of building culture. This is why I am delighted that the contribution from the curators Sabine Pollak, Michael Obrist, and Lorenzo Romito was selected for presentation in the Austrian Pavilion at the 19th edition of the Biennale.
The presentation, entitled ‘AGENCY FOR BETTER LIVING,’ highlights the issue of socially equitable, affordable housing. It centers on two different, even opposing, approaches to providing homes: social housing in Vienna, with its history that stretches back over more than a century, and informal housing in Rome. The comparison between these two models – Vienna’s planned, public residential buildings and Rome’s improvised and often spontaneous architecture – encourages an interdisciplinary dialogue that can provide intriguing inspiration for the creation of housing that is climate-friendly, socially just, and fit for the future, within but also far beyond the Austro-Italian context.
It seems to me that the Architecture Biennale provides the ideal framework for discussing these questions in an international context. It invites us to reflect upon the diversity of housing models from different countries and cultures and to ask how architecture can contribute to the shaping of equitable, livable, and sustainable cities.
Besides touring the exhibition, all visitors, activists, and experts will also have the opportunity to actively participate in the public events in the courtyard of the pavilion. This will host presentations, lectures, and workshops on a wide range of themes. Hence, I warmly invite you to share your ideas, thoughts, and strategies on the subject of ‘Living’ with the various protagonists.
Architecture can and must contribute to ensuring that cities are places of reconciliation, in which not just a privileged minority but everyone has access to good, affordable, and high-quality living space. This is why I would like to thank the curators for their valuable input and enormous engagement and to wish them lots of success, while also wishing all visitors and participants an inspiring experience and an intense exchange of ideas.”

Andreas Babler, MSc,
Vice-Chancellor and Federal Minister of Housing, Arts, Culture, Media and Sport

“We want to use the Biennale to share knowledge about the two systems in Vienna and Rome with as many other people as possible in the spirit of ‘Intelligens.’ The exhibition forms the basis for a discussion of potential futures for a BETTER LIVING that will hopefully be maintained long after the Biennale has ended. One of the tasks of the AGENCY will be to ensure that this discussion continues.”

Sabine Pollak, Michael Obrist, and Lorenzo Romito

4. PUBLICATION, ARCH+

ARCH+, the German magazine for architecture and urbanism which is well-known for defining the debate, is dedicating a special edition (with a print run of 10,000) to the Austrian Pavilion under the eponymous title AGENCY FOR BETTER LIVING. It contains numerous contributions by authors, series of photos, and illustrations of the graphics produced for the exhibition. The magazine is published in in English and German.

Guest editors: Sabine Pollak, Michael Obrist, Lorenzo Romito

Authors: Slađana Adamović, Sandra Bartoli, Luca Capuano & Alessandro Imbriaco, Giulia Fiocca, Silvio Galeano, Federica Giardini, Armando Gnisci, Lisz Hirn, IURmap (Chiara Davoli & Leroy S.P.Q.R'dam), Daniele Karasz, Veronica Kaup-Hasler, Michael Klein, Christina Lenart, Armin Linke, Rossella Marchini, Maik Novotny, Michael Obrist, Open Impact, Zara Pfeifer, Sabine Pollak, Christoph Reinprecht, Lorenzo Romito, Niloufar Tajeri, Philip Ursprung

Information about the authors: https://labiennale2025.at/en/publication/

ARCH+ issue 260
Wien/Roma – Agency for Better Living

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German, English

5. CURATORIAL TEAM

SABINE POLLAK teaches as a professor of space&designstrategies at the University of Arts Linz and runs the architecture firm Köb&Pollak Architektur in Vienna together with Roland Köb. She was awarded her doctorate at TU Wien in 1996 and qualified to teach in the field of housing construction in 2004. Sabine Pollak has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and run guest workshops at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Politecnico di Milano, the University of Salzburg, and the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. She works at the theoretical level (books, essays, and an ongoing urbanism blog in Der Standard), teaches experimental architecture and the history of housing and architectural theory, researches into the subjects of housing and feminism, community and urbanism, and works with her office as an expert for communal housing in Vienna. Residential buildings by Köb&Pollak Architektur such as the women's housing project ro*sa Donaustadt have been extensively exhibited and published and awarded numerous prizes.

MICHAEL OBRIST, born in Bolzano in 1972, is one of the five founding partners of feld72 Architekten in Vienna and a professor at TU Wien. Since 2018, he has been Professor of Housing and Design and Head of the university's Housing and Design Research Department. He made a central contribution to the creation of the interdisciplinary Centre for New Social Housing, which was jointly initiated by TU Wien and the International Building Exhibition IBA Wien 2022. He has held visiting professorships at Politecnico di Milano and the University of Arts Linz and taught at the Public Art Masterclass of the Salzburg Summer Academy and the Architectural Association Visiting School in Slovenia. He was the Guest Editor (with Christina Lenart and Bernadette Krejs) of ARCH+ "Vienna. The End of Housing (as a Typology)" (Spector Books) and Editor (with Antonietta Putzu) of "The Last Grand Tour" (Park Books). The work of feld72 in the areas of housing, educational and office buildings, and urbanism has received numerous awards (including a number of Austrian State Prizes, the Gold Medal for Italian Architecture, and the Architecture Award of the City of Vienna) and has been presented at several biennales, worldwide (Venice 2016, 2011, 2010, 2008, and 2004, Shenzhen/Hong Kong 2009, São Paulo 2007, and Rotterdam 2003).

LORENZO ROMITO is an artist, architect, and curator and a co-founder of Stalker (1995–). He is a professor of space&designstrategies at the University of Arts Linz (since 2022). Together with Giulia Fiocca, he teaches public art at NABA Rome (since 2020) and the Stalker module of the environmental humanities master's program at Roma Tre University (since 2016). As Visiting Professor, he occupied the Francesco De Sanctis Chair for Italian language and culture at ETH Zürich (spring 2024), and he was awarded the Prix de Rome in Architecture at the French Academy, Villa Medici, Rome (2000-2001). With Stalker, he has participated in various art and architecture events across Europe and worldwide, including the Venice Biennale (2000, 2008, 2014), Manifesta, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art in Ljubljana (2000), the Rome Quadriennale (2008), the Riwaq Biennale in Ramallah (2006), and the IABR Rotterdam Biennale (2008). He and Stalker were awarded the Curry Stone Prize for Social Design in 2016.

6. MEDIA CONTACT

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www.labiennale.org/en/architecture/2025/accreditation

PRESS CONFERENCE AND OPENING OF THE AUSTRIAN PAVILION
Friday, May 9, 2025 (press conference: 1 pm, opening: 3 pm)

VISITOR INFORMATION
Austrian Pavilion
Biennale Architettura 2025
19th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia
www.labiennale2025.at

Preview Days: May 8 – 9, 2025, 10 am – 7 pm
Exhibition Duration: May 10 – November 23, 2025
Opening Hours: 11 am – 7 pm (May 10 – September 28), 10 am – 6 pm (September 30 – November 23) (closed on Mondays, except May 12, June 2, July 21, September 1, October 20, and November 17)

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7. PROJECT TEAM

COMMISSIONER:
Federal Ministry of Housing, Arts, Culture, Media and Sport, Division IV – Arts and Culture

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Sabine Pollak, Michael Obrist, Lorenzo Romito

DESIGN:
Sabine Pollak, Michael Obrist, Lorenzo Romito

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Stadt Wien | Wohnbauförderung und Schlichtungsstelle für wohnrechtliche Angelegenheiten

Vienna City Council is supporting the Austrian contribution AGENCY FOR BETTER LIVING, which will be a place for sharing know-how about BETTER LIVING for all. One of the objectives of this comparison between Vienna and Rome is to use the successful and inspiring aspects of the two cities' very different approaches to illustrating and facilitating new strategies.

"Vienna is regarded as the international capital of social housing. Global comparisons of housing costs, the share of subsidized housing, the size of the public land reserve, and the quality of life are not the only solid arguments for this position. International delegations and experts visit the city on an almost daily basis to discover and study the Viennese model of social housing. These opportunities for mutual exchange, addressing the latest challenges, and sharing knowledge are highly enriching. This is exactly what this year's Biennale contribution and the very special supporting program of the AGENCY FOR BETTER LIVING, which is being staged in cooperation with Vienna City Council, is offering. By enabling visitors to see the familiar in a completely new light, these will create room for inspiration and innovation. Because we are constantly working to safeguard, adapt, and further develop the enormous achievements of this 100-year history of social housing."

Kathrin Gaál, Deputy Mayor and Executive City Councilor for Housing of the City of Vienna

“The integration of art and culture into the design of living spaces and public areas is an important contribution to creating livable and forward-looking living environments. The contribution in the Austrian Pavilion at the Biennale 2025 emphasizes the necessity of constructing and realizing new, creative types of housing for the future. Ongoing engagement with societal developments and requirements is essential in this context. In addition to sustainability as one of the most central aspects, it is important to consider what we can learn from existing systems and how we would like to live together as a society in the future. This ensures an ideal foundation for the living and housing of future generations. We are glad to support the contribution in the Austrian Pavilion at the Biennale 2025 as one of the main sponsors in collaboration with Real-Treuhand Immobilien and WAG Wohnungsanlagen Gesellschaft m.b.H.”

Michaela Keplinger-Mitterlehner, Deputy CEO Raiffeisenlandesbank OÖ

“We are delighted to support the Austrian contribution to the Biennale Architettura 2025 because the issue of housing is one of the most pressing questions facing today’s society. The comparison of housing in Vienna with the complexity of Italian structures, as exemplified by Rome, opens up perspectives that offer new insights and suggest new directions for us as Viennese developers. The long social tradition of Viennese housing also defines a framework on the basis of which we have realized many projects. Investigating other urban and sociological situations is valuable as the learning process can create opportunities to challenge previous guiding principles and to see beyond our self-satisfaction with the successes and the tried and tested systems of the past. The simple questions of what human-centered housing really needs, what affordable housing or living in the community really means, and whether our previous approaches have supported social relationships and shaped them for the future – or whether they have not, if anything, hampered them – permit a broad, clearly controversial, open-ended, and certainly fascinating discussion that can now take place thanks to the AGENCY FOR BETTER LIVING by curators Michael Obrist, Sabine Pollak, and Lorenzo Romito.”

Winfried Kallinger, CEO KALLINGER PROJEKTE