

Collective Domestic Design and Gender roles

Laundry in the Karl-Marx-Hof through the stories of women

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Abstract - This essay examines how working-class women's daily lives were influenced by domestic technologies and communal infrastructure in interwar "Red Vienna". It has a particular focus on the communal laundry facilities in the Karl-Marx-Hof, one of Vienna's largest municipal housing projects. The study emphasises both the physical strain of domestic work and the potential of social and technological advancement by drawing on newspaper excerpts, archival photos, and articles from workers' associations' journals. The study reveals that while domestic chores like laundry continued to be taxing and gendered, the installation of communal washhouses marked a significant change in living circumstances, especially for women. In addition to easing the technical and spatial constraints of private apartments, these areas functioned as centres for social interaction and collective labour. Women are shown performing labour-intensive tasks in both visual and textual sources, highlighting the ongoing struggle even in social contexts.

The study places Red Vienna's housing projects in the context of larger socialist reform initiatives that sought to improve women's status and modernise urban life by providing them with access to innovative amenities and infrastructure. However, it also highlights the shortcomings of these efforts, since many duties stayed the same in terms of gender and level of intensity. This paper provides a framework for understanding how infrastructure design can either alleviate or reinforce domestic inequality. The case of the Karl-Marx-Hof serves as an example of both the potential and difficulties of utilising technology and collaborative approaches to enhance the lives of women in the domestic environment.

Key words: Domestic architecture, Karl-Marx-Hof, Laundry room, Women, Red Vienna



Figure 1: Gerlach Jr., M. (1930).
Central laundry room of the Karl-Marx-Hof
Wiener Stadt- und Landesarchiv

Introduction

The central laundry room at the Karl-Marx-Hof, a striking representation of Red Vienna's (1919–1934) architectural and social aspirations, was photographed by Martin Gerlach Jr. in 1930 (Figure 1). The photograph depicts a bright, modern space: light floods in through glass ceiling tiles, white half-height partitions separate washing stations, and rows of centrifuges line the room. These images of women, some actively performing their jobs and others posing for the camera, represent the paradoxes and potential of community household work in interwar Vienna (Yazdanpanah, 2024).

Red Vienna's municipal housing program was revolutionary in its scale and ambition, reshaping urban space to reflect socialist ideals of collectivity and equality. The monumental building group known as Karl-Marx-Hof is the most emblematic structure that embodies Red Vienna. Designed between 1927 and 1930 by Karl Ehn, approximately 5,500 people could live in the 1382 dwellings in this complex (Kalfaoglu

Hatipoglu, 2020). Scholars such as Blau (2014) and Breuss (2019) emphasise the role of architecture in promoting these social values, particularly in the integration of communal infrastructure within housing like laundries, kindergartens, and shared kitchens. These scholars argue that the socialist administration sought to transform domestic labour through spatial reorganisation, thereby alleviating the burdens placed on working-class women. The laundry rooms in municipal housing estates, including Karl-Marx-Hof, were meant to modernise household work, introducing technology such as electric washing machines and centrifuges to reduce physical strain (Blau, 2014; Breuss, 2019).

Yet, as Yazdanpanah (2024) and Leichter (1927) highlight, the experience of women in these spaces was shaped by rigid structures and persistent gender norms. While mechanisation seemingly eased the workload, the strict scheduling—one designated

washing day per month—often proved stressful rather than liberating. Women had little autonomy over when and how they used the space, and their labour remained invisible within the broader socialist discourse that prioritised factory work over domestic duties (Leichter, 1927; Yazdanpanah, 2024). Moreover, laundries were exclusively female spaces, reinforcing the traditional division of labour. That meant, men were largely absent, except for the laundry masters who oversaw and disciplined the women's work (Yazdanpanah, 2024). This stands in contrast to the broader rhetoric of Red Vienna, though they advocated for gender equality, they failed to dismantle deeply ingrained societal roles.

Commonalities can be found in oral histories, which further illuminate the emotional toll of these communal washing spaces. Historian Reinhard Sieder (1985) documents how women in private apartments had the flexibility to spread washing over two to three days per month, whereas the rigid scheduling of Red Vienna's laundries compressed all tasks into a single exhausting day, intensifying stress through strict supervision and turning communal washing into a physically and emotionally taxing ordeal. Here, a paradox can be seen through the atmosphere of the laundry room (Figure 1). The scene can be described as calm, yet productive, with women working by the washing machines. On the right, two women seem to be talking to each other or maybe posing nonchalantly together for the photographer. A basket fully filled with white laundry, however, illustrates the large amount of work that still needs to be done.

The central question of this paper is: How did collective domestic spaces like the laundry room of the Karl-Marx-Hof shape the role of women and their social behaviour in Vienna during the interwar period?

By looking at the implications of the shared spaces in the socialist housing project of the Karl-Marx-Hof, ideals can be revealed that should be enclosed in sustainable design today, almost a century later. By concentrating on Karl-Marx-Hof's laundry room as a key typology within Red Vienna's communal housing, this research deepens the perspective of previous scholars. This study looks at the spaces' dual significance as locations of progressive social policy and as sites where traditional gender norms were maintained. Through the analysis of archival material, including literature, newspaper articles, and photographs, this research will examine the conflict between Red Vienna's ideological goals and the lived realities of its female inhabitants. Further theoretical knowledge will be gathered through the use of previous scientific literature of scholars, and an interview will be conducted with Julia Schranz, a researcher on the topic of Red Vienna and the Karl-Marx-Hof, to form a better understanding of the social and political environment of that time.

The thesis will be structured by first investigating this social and political context of Red Vienna. Moving on, the typology of collective domestic spaces within social housing will be examined. For this study, the communal laundry room of the Karl-Marx-Hof will be the primary subject, as it reflects many of the socialist ideals of Red Vienna. Literature and archival material will bring insights into the experience of such spaces. With this, various ways in which the washroom performs will be analysed. In doing so, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how architecture and social policy intersected to shape gendered labour and communal life in interwar Vienna.

01. Socioeconomic & political context

Europe experienced significant social and economic instability following World War I. After the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, its former lands were divided, resulting in political unrest and economic chaos. Due to an influx of migrants from the disbanded empire, Austria, and especially Vienna, found itself in a precarious position as a newly formed republic. Subsequently, dealing with food shortages, inflation, and an urgent housing crisis (Mesner, 2018). With pre-war conditions already marked by overcrowding and inadequate living standards, the housing crisis had reached a critical point by the end of the war (Chaddock, 1932).

By 1919, the Social Democratic Workers' Party had gained a decisive majority in Vienna's municipal government, marking the beginning of what became known as Red Vienna—a period of progressive socialist reforms focused on improving living conditions for the working class (Blau, 2000). The municipal government embarked on an ambitious social welfare agenda, heavily investing in public education, healthcare, and—most notably—housing.

In contrast to private housing developments in other parts of Europe, which frequently put profit ahead of social welfare, the new Viennese housing model was very different. Other cities and metropolitan areas gave way to neoliberal privatisation trends; the City of Vienna stuck to the tried and tested model of municipal housing and is thus able to provide the population with affordable housing on a large scale (Ramser, 2021). Vienna's socialist administration took direct responsibility for urban development, implementing policies that prioritised affordability, hygiene, and communal living (Chaddock, 1932). In the new municipal housing projects, the building density was a maximum of 50 per cent (Eigner et al., 1999). More strict building codes also made sure that

apartments had access to public areas, sufficient ventilation, and natural light—all of which were thought to be critical for enhancing public health and quality of life. Housing construction underwent a fundamental change compared to the pre-war period, reported to be a menace to the health and efficiency of the working classes and their children (Chaddock, 1932). A survey of 1917 revealed that almost three-quarters of all living quarters consisted of small flats of two rooms or less – utterly inadequate accommodations for even the most essential needs. A very high building density – plots of these old building blocks were built upon for 85 per cent – resulted in dark flats grouped around narrow atriums (Eigner et al., 1999). A considerable proportion of the population lived in one-room dwellings, badly ventilated and inadequately lit. More than 90 per cent of the houses of previous living conditions of the social class did not include a toilet or tap water, which was located in the corridor of the building. Furthermore, the houses were often accommodated not only by a worker family, but also by subtenants and bed renters due to the high rents, which were raised arbitrarily by the landlords before the First World War (Gieselmann, 1978).

In order to meet the housing crisis and act on pre-war housing issues, the government decided to become a builder and landlord on a large scale. A bundle of political and legal framework conditions was necessary for this. A constitutional law, put forward by the Social Democratic Party, gave Vienna the status of a separate federal province from the 1st of January in 1922, together with the corresponding fiscal sovereignty (Eigner et al., 1999). This was the background for the municipal housing construction activities of the interwar period, beginning in 1922/23 in the city and province of Vienna. Through special legislation and powers of taxation, large areas of land were acquired, enabling the erection of flats and

houses for the working classes on a large scale and at relatively low costs. The centrepiece of this programme and the most enduring achievement of Red Vienna was the construction of the numerous municipal housing projects, known as *Wiener Gemeindebauten*. This building typology developed within the municipal housing program by Social Democrats in Red Vienna was designed to reshape the social and economic infrastructure of the Austrian capital (Sudaş, 2011; Blau, 2000). At the opening of one of the new housing complexes in 1924, Karl Seitz, the mayor of Vienna at the time, also made the following statement about the new form:

*"Now begins the new building period, in which we will no longer construct small single buildings with narrow courts, but large communal housing complexes, in which the people will live as a mass together, and yet each person, according to his individuality, can also live a particular and private life. [...] We want to educate our young not as individualists, outsiders, loners. Rather, they should be raised communally and be brought up as socialised individuals."*¹

Distributed throughout the city, the social welfare programme of *Gemeindebauten* provided Vienna with not only a large amount of new living space (64,000 units), in which one-tenth of the city's population was rehoused, but also a vast new infrastructure of social services and cultural institutions (Mesner, 2018). Between 1919 and 1933, 400 communal housing blocks were constructed in which workers' dwellings were incorporated with various shared amenities (Figure 2-4). These shared architectural amenities reflect the city's commitment to holistic social welfare (Blau, 2000).

The individual apartments in the *Gemeindebauten* were compact and minimally equipped. While they had gas, electricity, running water, and toilets, they lacked "luxury fittings" like built-in cabinets, closets, or bathtubs or showers. In the buildings of *Gemeindebau*, however, the focus was on public, communal facilities like laundry rooms with contemporary appliances (Blau, 2000).

According to Chaddock (1932), municipal housing has slowly decreased overcrowding, lessened the impact of high rents on working-class people's quality of life, and grown to be a significant contributor to improvements in comfort and health.

1. Seitz, K. (1924). Arbeiter-Zeitung, p. 8; quoted after: Eve Blau, *The Architecture of Red Vienna 1919-1934*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1999, p. 156.

Figure 2: Zapletal, C., (1926). Metzleinstaler Hof
Wien Museum Online Sammlung

Figure 3: Gerlach Jr., M. (1930) Sandeilen
Wien Museum Online Sammlung

Figure 4: Gerlach Jr., M. (1930) Karl-Marx-Hof
Wien Museum Online Sammlung



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Figure 5: Karl Marx Hof
(Own image, 2025)

02. Karl-Marx-Hof

“Wenn wir einst nicht mehr sind, werden diese Steine für uns sprechen.” [When we are no more, these stones will speak for us.]

A renowned sentence, spoken on 12 October 1930 by Karl Seitz, who opened the Karl-Marx-Hof in the Heiligenstadt district on that day. Chief City Building Officer Karl Ehn planned the residential complex, which was built between 1926 and 1930. With this, a “superblock” was created: a building complex with often more than a thousand flats, which together enabled largely self-sufficient communal living (Marchhart, 1984).

The aim was to give architectural expression to a social concept based on social reformist considerations. The superblocks were designed as connected, block-like structures, comprising a self-contained refuge (Eigner et al., 1999). Because of their monumentality, they were also referred to as

“people’s residential palaces” (Weihsmann, 1985). At the time, the Karl-Marx-Hof housed almost 5,000 people with 1,382 apartments. To provide living space for as many people as possible, the apartment sizes in the municipal buildings were generally relatively small, around 48-50 m² in size, offering the opportunity to retreat into undisturbed privacy. However, by building around the perimeter of large courtyards – the built-up area amounts to only 18.4% of the property – the Karl Marx-Hof offers its residents spacious green areas (Wachberger, n.d.) In addition to transforming housing from a basic place to live, the *Gemeindebau* has evolved into a multipurpose building that houses culture, health, and education. It engages with architecture as a means of realising a social utopia within these facilities (Förster, 1978). Till today, the Karl-Marx-Hof is seen as an extraordinary example of the *Gemeindebauten* as a space of housing invention. The architecture of the residential and community

facilities reflects the need for the foundations of healthy and communal living (Gemeinde Wien, 1930). Within the more-than-kilometre-long building complex, many facilities were present, such as two kindergartens, a youth centre, a mothers' advice centre, a library, a medical facility with an outpatient clinic, a pharmacy, a dental clinic, its own post office, and other stores.

In the early 1900s, the city council sought to establish a new standard for personal hygiene and household cleanliness as the municipality grew more conscious of the advantages of a hygienic lifestyle for the general population (Velikova, 2025). As apartments typically did not include sanitary facilities or laundry facilities, it became more important to provide these institutions for the tenants in social housing (Schranz, 2025).²

Conforming to Chaddock (1932), a central steam laundry, complete with electric washing machines, dryers, mangles, and other modern conveniences, has been built in buildings that house three hundred families or more. Here, housewives can use power equipment to do their own laundry, including washing and ironing, for a nominal fee that is added to the rent. Only once every two weeks, it is generally possible to allow each family the use of the central facilities. To ensure privacy when handling the clothes, each person is given a small cubicle with a washboard and tub.

Compared to the previous effort of laundry day in small, frequently unventilated kitchens, the installation of electrically operated central laundries was a social achievement (Gieselmann, 1978). The following statement reveals the stress associated with laundry day in a former dwelling:

"In the old houses, laundry day was the family's nightmare. The poor woman begins this task at dawn, and only at dusk is she able to take the wet laundry into the attic to dry." ³

2. By 1931, Vienna's municipal estates had 34 central washhouses with a total of 830 washstands, 262 washing machines, 193 centrifuges, 33 ironing machines, 240 ironing stands, and 623 drying rooms, along with 62 baths with 204 tub cabins and 253 shower cubicles (Das Rote Wien Waschsalon, 2022).

3. The New Vienna: Städtewerk. The New Vienna / published with the official collaboration of the Municipality of Vienna. Vienna: Elbemühl, 1926-1928: 1 / published with the official collaboration of the Municipality of Vienna. Vienna: The New Vienna; Vienna: Elbemühl, 1926. Vienna Library in the City Hall. , B-72420 <https://resolver.obvsg.at/urn:nbn:at:AT-WBR-135701> / Public Domain Mark 1.0

Although each flat had its own water supply in the Karl-Marx-Hof, the cost of building a private bathroom was still too costly (Velikova, 2025). Therefore, the establishment of two central washing rooms is a particularly significant component of public infrastructure to accommodate its vast number of residents. No insight is provided by historical literature into the independent use of both Karl-Marx-Hof laundries (Velikova, 2025). For this research, it will be assumed that the collective former use of both facilities was similar, and will focus on the largest washing room (Figure 6 & 7). As seen in the plans and historical documentation, the combined floor area of the two washing rooms was 2309.54 m², or 1.48% of the entire estate (Velikova, 2025; Magistrat der Stadt Wien, 1930). Three stories and a small upper, intermediate floor for equipment were included in the construction of both buildings. Large windows at the main staircase, and variously shaped windows at the east and west facades, provided natural light for the public rooms. The ground floor was delegated to the main laundry facilities, the upper floor housed the showers and bathtubs, and the basement floor was used for storage.



Figure 6: Northern washroom (Own image, 2025)

As analysed by Velikova (2025), in the first section of the ground floor, two spacious entrances led guests into a 30.10 m² entry hall, which was flanked by two anterooms and restrooms. The welcoming area was followed by the central laundry hall (667.00 m²). 43 laundry cabins, each measuring 6.40 m² and equipped with utility sinks, washing stands, and extra boilers, were available for use in this northern washroom. The central part of the ground floor (180 m²) accommodated 3 spaces for mangle work, such as drying and pressing of the laundry. Additionally, the north side of this floor houses the machinery rooms, with the electric boilers (68.25 m²) and thermal energy storage tanks (183.75 m²)

WOHNHAUSANLAGE - XIX. - BEZ. - HEILIGENSTÄDTERSTRASSE
WÄSCHEREI-UND-BADEANLAGE
ERDGESCHOSS

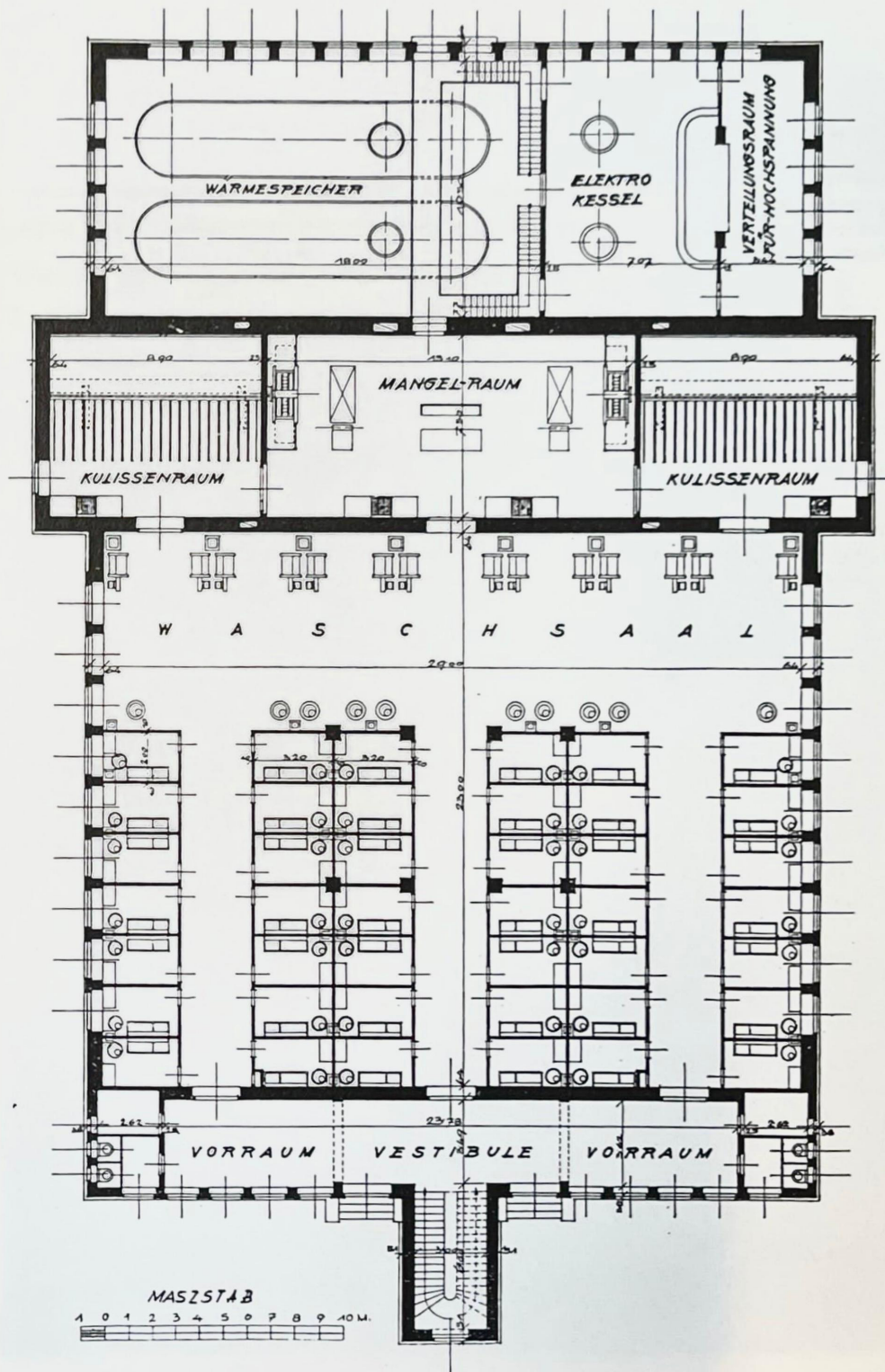


Figure 7: Floorplan northern central laundry room.
Gemeinde Wien (1930). Der Karl Marx-Hof : die Wohnhausanlage der Gemeinde Wien auf der Hagenwiese in Heiligenstadt

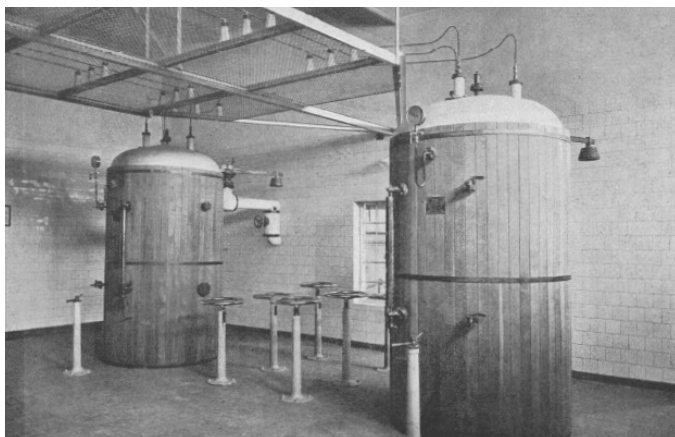


Figure 8: Boilers of northern washroom. Gemeindef Wien (1930). Der Karl Marx-Hof : die Wohnhausanlage der Gemeindef Wien auf der Hagenwiese in Heiligenstadt

Due to the fact that the entire complex of the Karl-Marx-Hof had to be kept free of smoke, coal-fired heating was avoided, and the only choice was between a boiler system heated with gas or electricity. The decision was made to heat the water electrically using two boilers (Figure 8), as it is feasible and affordable to use power throughout the night with a properly equipped operation (Gieselmann, 1978). The aggregate volume of 200 m³ of water in the boilers is enough to provide water and steam for a laundry and related bathing facility for a full day of operation. The water was heated by the boilers to eight atmospheres of pressure before being moved to two larger thermal stores, each measuring three metres in diameter and fifteen metres in length (Magistrat der Stadt Wien, 1930). When looking at the northern laundry house (Figure 5), the washing stations are arranged in individual cabins, and in each individual cabin there is a small washing boiler next to the washing drum (Gieselmann, 1978). Combined, the two laundry rooms contained 62 individual washing machines, all operated with electrical power.

The layout of the laundry room in the Karl-Marx-Hof demonstrates an incredibly industrial logic applied to a traditionally domestic task. Its symmetrical design, uniform laundry cabins, and distinct zones for pressing, drying, and washing almost resemble the layout of a factory floor. This implies that housework, especially laundry, was being rethought as a rationalised, quasi-industrial process rather than as unorganised, individualised labour concealed within the private sphere. This impression is strengthened by the addition of electric boilers and thermal storage, which indicate a mechanised and systematic approach to routine maintenance tasks.

As said earlier, Red Vienna's socialist ideals focused on collectivity and equality. By centralising and spatially formalising tasks such as laundry, domestic labour was adapted to a matter of urban infrastructure,

implying both a social and communal function as a potential for modernisation through technical innovations. Tasks like laundry were centralised and spatially formalised, transforming domestic work into an urban infrastructure issue that implied both a social, communal role and the possibility of modernisation through technological advancements.



Figure 9: Entrance of the northern washroom (own image, 2025)

In order to comprehend the conflicts between the reinforcement of traditional gender roles and the advancements in technology and infrastructure for reproductive labour, the term *Waschsalon* is essential. In "I KNOW I CARE—How Red Is Vienna Today?" Micic (2020) touches upon the topic of female reproductive labour in Red Vienna. The *Waschküche* was changed to a *Waschsalon* by Red Vienna, a significant change in terminology. The proletarian kitchen where the laundry was actually cooked is known as a *Waschküche* (kitchen for laundry). The *Waschsalon*, whose name was a reference to the salon of the upper classes and nobility, signified an improvement in the areas used for reproductive labour, specifically the laborious task of washing. Considering a washing machine usually costs three months' income, working-class individuals at the time could not afford the communal laundry infrastructures provided by social housing, which included electric washing machines (Micic, 2020). Still, the laundries and bathhouses were frequently visited and made a positive impact on the overall hygiene and health of the Karl-Marx-Hof residents (Velikova, 2025). According to Weihsmann (2002), these amenities provided the bare minimum in a social structure, but were still considered an improvement.

03. The role of women

Gruber (1998) asserts that during Red Vienna, in addition to the fundamental rights of citizens, including housing, the organisation of issues pertaining to the workplace was just as significant. Despite the policies' lack of focus on working conditions, the working hours and wages of employees—particularly women—played a vital role in improving the lot of working-class families (Sudas, 2011). The focus on women was heavily criticised for tagging women as “mother, wife, and worker” rather than releasing them to ensure the labour force's continued existence (Sudas, 2011). The chairman of the Housing Estate Department, Hans Kampffmeyer, stated in 1926:

“In no other sphere of life was there such a waste of human labour as in the household. Solving this problem is at least as important for the true liberation of women and their equality with men as universal suffrage.”

However, housing complexes based on public, communal, or social housing translate policies of “state care” into “environments of care” with women still perceived as having to provide the necessary care (Azzura et al., 2019; Krasny, 2020). Various movements were set up by women to stand up for their rights, both in Austria and on a broader scale. The International Co-operative Women's Guilds (ICWG) agenda focused on peace, improvements in household labour, and the economy and ideology of cooperation (Tešija, 2023). In 1927, a report called ‘The Family Wash’ was published and discussed internationally by women involved in the cooperative movement. Women activists themselves designed and produced this brief international study on laundry practices, which discusses women's experiences and covers a wide range of their paid and unpaid labour (Tešija, 2025). According to the ICWG's representation of housewives, labour-saving devices should be used for household chores in order to free up women from needless drudgery and allow them to fully contribute to community life (The Family Wash, 1927).

Previous scholars highlight the importance of laundry in our society: “Where There Is Life, There Is Laundry” (Janowicz, 2022/2023). Laundry is inseparable from the ways homes are constituted and reconstituted on an everyday basis (Pink, 2012). In addition to daily household negotiations, deceptions, and moralities (Pink, 2005), it is a component of the process of creating and remaking the texture and experience of home (Kaufmann, 1998). Laundry is historically rooted in our everyday practice, through which resources such as water and energy are consumed, constantly changing

over time (Shove, 2003). Placing a background activity, such as doing laundry, at the centre of the analysis allows us to begin revealing some of the specific tacit, embodied, and sensory ways of the practice. Hereby, the influence is made visible of how laundry is done as well as how people perceive the environments in which it is performed (Pink et al., 2013).

The most consistent finding from numerous studies on the division of labour in the home is that women perform more housework than men (Kovach, 2016). Previously conducted research affirms that laundry is a time-consuming task that women perform more often than men (Bianchi et al. 2000, Gupta et al. 2009). This distorted division of domestic duties, in particular laundry, can also be traced to Red Vienna, where women were more in charge of all the activities of the household work (Figure 10).



Figure 10: Höft S. (2019) Distribution of household work per gender. So leben wir (Zeitverwendungsstudie 2008/9 Statistik Austria). From Micić, J. (2020), I KNOW I CARE— How Red Is Vienna Today?

Communal housing's shared areas were designed to reduce household chores, but they also perpetuated traditional gender norms. Even in communal settings, women were still primarily in charge of household chores, and their labour was generally underappreciated and unpaid (Sieder, 1985). Mechanisation eased the physical strain of washing, but it had little effect on the overall structure of domestic work (Blau, 2000), as the rigorous scheduling of communal laundries gave women little control over how they used the facilities (Sieder, 1985).

Martin Gerlach (1879–1944) was the photographer of many of Vienna's architecture and public housing infrastructures during the interwar period, commissioned by the City Council (Velikova, 2025). He also captured various laundry rooms of Red Vienna's municipal housing. This paper includes photographs from Sandleiten, another residential complex from Gemeindebauten, to illustrate what the interiors of the Karl-Marx-Hof facilities may have looked like, given that the municipal estate was of comparable size and built during the same period.

Next to archival images, various Viennese newspapers from 1925–1935 have been analysed to illustrate how laundry was perceived (see appendices). In newspaper articles, technological innovation in Red Vienna was presented as a means of achieving social liberation, especially for women who were subjected to the demands of unpaid domestic work. It was more than just a functional improvement. The introduction of communal laundry rooms and electric household appliances made washing—one of the most taxing and time-consuming tasks—a key representation of contemporary development and social advancement.

The oppressive toll of laundry before mechanisation is depicted in the 1928 poem *Washing Day!* in poetic yet horrifying detail. The domestic worker laments, *"Our poor bodies tremble / We brush and twist in a restless rhythm / Until our hands sink in the late night"* emphasising the draining work of manual labour that took up women's lives from dawn until night (H. Rundstuck, Vereinsblatt, 1928, p. 2). The poem's last words, *"No more wash day for others – rebellion,"* challenge the status quo and strike a rebellious tone.

According to an article published in *Mein Haushalt* in 1928, *"The electricity and machine take away most of the hassle and allow her to look forward to the once-dreaded washing day without worry. And we owe all of this to technology, which has triumphantly conquered housework."* Another article claims that *"A family of four can finish the washing in three hours, leaving only the ironing to be done at home"* (The Family Wash, 1927). The importance of accessible infrastructure is highlighted as well: *"Some form of communal effort seems the only way of bringing labour-saving machinery within reach of every woman"* (The Family Wash, 1927).

Women were urged to rethink their roles more and more. *"Today's woman must be able to adjust and adapt to the new times, because otherwise she will drown in the thousand and one small jobs and will have neither the strength nor the time to live for herself,"* Erna Neuhauser wrote in *Die Unzufriedene*. In this situation, technology was ideological rather than just mechanical. It represented freedom, relaxation, and even education — *"For the good of the community and for the pleasure*

of herself and her family". This is also evident in an electrical washing machine advertisement that claims, *"Our mother is amazed and laughs because Scando does her washing,"* (Figure 11). A woman is portrayed smiling whilst doing her make-up and a little girl points astonished towards the washing machine.



Figure 11: Magazine advertisement. *Mein Haushalt, ein freund und berater der modernen frau* (1928). Issue 5, p. 16. Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek

Despite this optimism, change was not universally welcomed. There was still opposition from both men and some women who thought that paying for communal laundry services was unnecessary. *"Many of the husbands considered this quite a superfluous expense; the women had better do the washing themselves again,"* one said in *The Family Wash* (1927). Additionally, the laundry day in these central laundries began at 7:15 am, and many women found the "rush" to be extremely stressful because they had to finish their work and clear the washhouse by 2 pm. In an interview with historian Reinhard J. Sieder fifty years later, Theresia Sturm recalled that she *"frequently failed to complete the laundry in time"*. She had to carry the remainder of the laundry back to the kitchen, wash it in the sink and then distribute it to the loggia to dry, *"as far back as possible so the inspector would not see it on his courtyard round"*.



Figure 12: Gerlach Jr., M. (1925) Sandleiten
Wien Museum Online Sammlung

Although machines were doing the majority of the work by then, technology had its thresholds. Some women were so resistant to using new technologies like hot-air chambers and centrifuges that advancements had to be practically imposed on them.

Gerlach's images of Sandleiten's communal laundry room reveal this dual reality. One image highlights the weight of labour that persists even in modern facilities as women manoeuvre drying racks surrounded by full laundry baskets (Image 12). A woman stands in the centre, looking straight into the camera with a focused yet worn-out posture. These photographs show not only advancements but also the tenacity and rigour of women's labour in Vienna's new public areas. Another image captures women in mid-motion, hunched over big washboards and sinks (Image 13). Their postures appear worn out, and their faces appear weary. On the left, a woman rests with her hands on her sides, as if being tired from the task.

In the end, technological innovation gave domestic labour a new form but did not eliminate it. They reallocated duties, moved laundry from private kitchens to communal areas, and women became contributors to the development of modernity. Still, only women were persistently put in the position for household chores, leaving the laundry room a gender-entrenched space.

Figure 13: Gerlach Jr., M. (n.d.) Sandleiten
Bezirksmuseum Ottakring



04. Conclusion

This essay has looked at how Red Vienna's municipal housing projects reorganised domestic work as part of a larger socialist vision for social reform, especially through amenities like shared laundry rooms. By offering technologically sophisticated communal areas that were woven into the fabric of daily life, these infrastructures sought to lessen the burden of unpaid domestic labour, particularly for women, according to sources like Blau (2000) and Velikova (2025). The burden of work was not removed by communal laundry rooms; rather, it was modernised and collectivised. Through these shared infrastructures, women were partially freed from domestic inefficiency and isolation and had access to better facilities. Even though this communal model represented a substantial improvement over pre-war circumstances (Kalfaoglu Hatipoglu, 2020), laundry remained a physically taxing and strongly gendered task (Micic, 2020). The laundry rooms' rigid spatial arrangement, with its repetitive structure and systematic design, is a reflection of the mechanisation of domestic work during Red Vienna. Nonetheless, by providing access solely to women, these areas perpetuated gendered labour divisions and incorporated traditional roles into a contemporary architectural design.

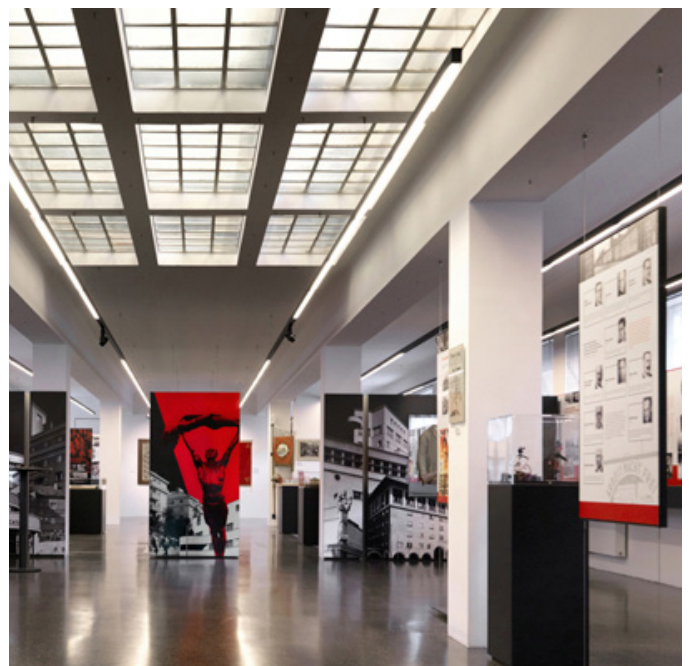
The laundry facilities at Karl-Marx-Hof are still in use today, although they are run more rationally and commercially (Image 14 & 15). Residents only have individual time slots and keys, which limits unplanned social interaction. The second floor of Karl-Marx-Hof's northern laundry room also features a permanent exhibition about Red Vienna's history, underscoring the continued symbolic and educational significance of the space (Image 16).



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Figure 14: Laundry room Karl-Marx-Hof
(Own image, 2025)

Figure 15: Laundry room Karl-Marx-Hof
(Own image, 2025)

Figure 16: Exhibition in Karl-Marx-Hof
Das Rote Wien Waschsalon

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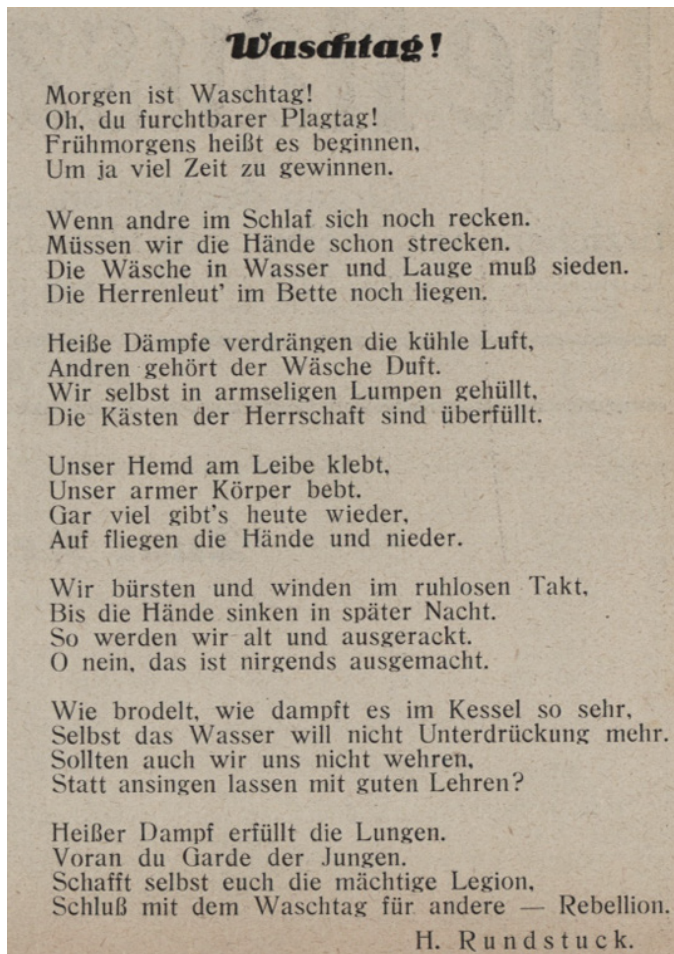
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Appendices

A. Poem from newspaper



Washing day!

Tomorrow is washing day!
Oh, you terrible plague day!
We have to start early in the morning.
To gain a lot of time.

When others are still stretching in their sleep.
We must already stretch our hands.
The washing in water and lye must boil.
The gentlemen

Hot vapours displace the cool air,
Others own the laundry scent.
We ourselves are wrapped in poor rags.
The boxes of the lordship are overflowing.

Our shirts stick to our bodies.
Our poor bodies tremble.
There's so much again today.
Our hands fly up and down.

We brush and twist in a restless rhythm,
Until our hands sink in the late night.
That's how we grow old and naked.
Oh no, that's nowhere to be found.

How it bubbles, how it steams so much in the cauldron.
Even the water no longer wants suppression.
Shouldn't we fight back too. Instead of being sung to with good teachings?

Hot steam fills the lungs.
Ahead you guard of the young.
Create yourselves the mighty legion,
No more wash day for others - rebellion

Rundstuck, H. (January 1928) Vereinsblatt - Organ des Vereines der Heim- und Hausarbeiterinnen die hausangestellte, nr1, p2, Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek

B. Extract from newspaper article

"Dear "dissatisfied"! You will probably be surprised at how long it takes me to keep my promise to write an essay about my experiences in Vienna. I once made an attempt to do this, but I came to the conclusion that I am not at all capable of properly describing the impressions I gained during my tour of red Vienna.
The central laundry in the Sandleite residential complex was a big surprise for me. The laundry only requires manual labour; it washes itself and unwinds itself. That made me a little dizzy. I wasn't prepared for them to come up with such witchcraft stories in Vienna"

Schrenk, K. (January, 1930). Die Unzufriedene nr3, p4
Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek

C. Extract from magazine article

"Three questions for the housewives.
How should it be built?
Fine large settlement company writes us:
Architects and building companies are always accused of asking the least of those who are most interested in the new apartments, the housewives. In order not to face this accusation, we would like to ask the housewives' opinion on three important things:
Our company is currently building apartments consisting of a living room, a bedroom, a kitchen, a bathroom or two rooms, etc. To make housework easier, a modern central laundry room with a machine is to be installed instead of the usual hand-washing room. Which of the readers has already had the opportunity to get to know the usual systems in order to make suggestions for improvements to the existing system based on experience? It is well proven that the modern mechanical system is more popular and is in itself more practical than the hand-washing room."

Blatt der Hausfrau (May 1928). p.4
Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek

D. Extract from newspaper article

"The cleaning of laundry is a health problem in two ways, especially in the home. Firstly, the cleaning process itself is strenuous and is usually carried out in rooms that are heavily saturated with water vapor, so that health risks must be taken into account. But then working with dirty laundry also brings with it the great risk of transmitting infectious diseases. [...] For the person doing the washing, being in the air of the washroom, which is heavily saturated with water vapor, can be detrimental to their health. However, laundry staff try to protect themselves against the steam from the laundry, which they rightly find unpleasant, by opening doors and windows. But the draught, which is initially desired to remove the steam, causes illness to the washerwoman, who is often drenched from strenuous work. This should not be taken lightly, as it is often not just a simple cold, but serious rheumatic complaints that are the result. Dr. Perner points out the minor "operational hazards" of washing, which include cracks in the hands, skin inflammations and nail diseases. Although fortunately these injuries usually heal quickly and are reduced by using good, mild detergents rather than harsh materials for washing purposes, they must still be taken into account when washing in the home, because here, in contrast to professional washing in dry cleaners where machines are widely used, the majority of the work still has to be done "by hand" in the truest sense of the word.

Ing. P. Grempe, M. (September 1930) Vereinsblatt - Organ des Vereines der Heim- und Hausarbeiterinnen. p. 5-7
Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek

E. Extract from The Family Wash

"In Austria, electrically equipped washkitchens exist only in Vienna, but there the Municipal Council is including electric wash-kitchens and drying rooms in almost all its new blocks of flats. "The women have merely to superintend the work of the machine," writes Austria, "they themselves need only take the washing from one machine to the next...they can wash, dry and mangle the clothes for a family of four in three hours, so that there is only the ironing to do at home. Nevertheless there were difficulties at first because the women have to pay a certain amount towards the wages of the man in charge of the machines and for the electric current. Many of the husbands considered this quite a superfluous expense; the women had better do the washing themselves again. But some of the women also opposed the new system because they found it cheaper to wash themselves when they had nothing to pay for labour. An example of how difficult it is to replace the unpaid labour of the housewife by paid labour".

What is the solution for washing day-that most labourious of the housewife's tasks? Some form of communal effort seems the only way of bringing labour-saving machinery within reach of every woman. Yet there is substantial agreement among the countries which have expressed an opinion on the point, that at present women prefer to do their washing themselves. "Most Austrian women are convinced," writes Austria, "that they can only get nice white clothes, and that the clothes are only taken care of when they are washed at home and not at a public laundry".

The chief difficulty is undoubtedly that of expense. To send her clothes to a laundry, even to pay the small charges of a municipal wash-house, means paying out money which a woman seems to save by doing the washing herself. But here experience teaches much. Co-operative women know that wise spending is, in the long run, saving; and against the money paid out at a laundry or wash-house must be set the saving at home on fuel and soap and appliances as well as in health and strength. Where municipal wash-houses are available or the communal wash-houses of the new housing scheme, the charges are more than counterbalanced by the actual saving on fuel and appliances. And if health and strength are taking into account the balance on sending at least the heavy goods to the co-operative laundry is surely on the right side.

The ideal solution is undoubtedly that of electrically equipped communal wash-houses attached to each block of dwellings, as in the new municipal and co-operative houses in Vienna and Stockholm; for here the housewife can wash her own things to her own satisfaction with the minimum of labour and cost without going far from home."

The Family Wash: An International Study. (London: International Co-operative Women's Guild, 1927), Hull History Centre

F. Extract from magazine article

"...and six men's shirts and four sheets. So, that's all! But hurry, otherwise we won't finish. And the blue laundry mustn't get mixed up with the other laundry, like the other day. And you mustn't brush it either, or you'll tear everything up. Oh, God, if only there weren't laundry day!"

This is roughly how the introduction to every washing day sounds, where the housewife can call on a laundress to help her. But where she has to do everything herself, she also has to do all the work and it is really no wonder that she becomes grumpy and peevish. Because washing is hard work and laundry is expensive. In addition, in the large tenement blocks, where many parties live close together, where there is only one small laundry room deep in the basement for all has to suffice, a precise schedule only gives each woman just enough time to do her laundry. And of course that means starting at dawn so that the laundry can be hung up on the floor before dark.

The victorious technology of our time has finally brought about change here too. Wherever the individual family in their own home or rented property has the space or at least the possibility to set up their own appliances, the small washing machine has come into play. First of all, there are various washing aids. Pressing and rolling devices to save rubbing, rumbling, and brushing; boiling vessels with ingeniously designed water and steam circulation; washing machines in drum form that could be moved by hand; and finally completely automatic washing machines that were powered by electricity. We reserve the right to present all of these aids and machines to our dear readers later. Today we want to show what technology can achieve using just one electric machine. An electric washing machine consists of a copper drum in which the laundry is soaked the night before. In the morning, the lye is replaced with 8 to 12 liters of hot soapy water, the electrical contact is plugged in, and the machine is left running for a quarter of an hour, after which the laundry is clean and ready for use because it has been cooked and passed through steam at 100°. The machine holds 8 kg of dry laundry, about the weekly requirement of a family of four. The power consumption is so low that it is almost negligible, and you also save on soap and detergent.

In contrast to this family washing machine, large washing machines had to be installed everywhere where many people live together, i.e., in all large modern city buildings, such as in our public housing estates in Vienna. because when 300 to 1500 people live together in a block of flats, you can't install enough washing machines of the old system in one house.

A modern steam system supplies a central laundry room with steam and hot water. This contains a number of electrically operated laundry boilers and drum washing machines. Each machine has a washtub with cold and hot water supply and a washboard. The laundry is boiled in steam and spun with centrifuge machines that spin out the water. Electric laundry rollers take care of the ironing, and special drying machines dry the clothes at 40°C. After soaking them the night before, every woman can take her laundry home dry and ironed in 4 to 5 hours.

As our pictures show, the famous "weight has been lifted from the housewife's shoulders"! The machine and electricity take most of the hassle away and allow her to look forward to the once-so-dreaded washing day without worry. And we owe all of this to technology, which has triumphantly conquered housework, and to the willingness of sensible people to make use of its capabilities."

Mein Haushalt (February 1928). p. 27
Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek