

## The Vienesse Kitchen

A do-it-yourself kitchen



The *Wiener Kuchl* (Vienesse Kitchen) is the result of a cooperation between MAK – Österreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst / Gegenwartskunst (Austrian Museum for Applied Arts / Contemporary Arts), Obdach Wien gemeinnützige GmbH and „Hunger auf Kunst und Kultur“ (Hunger for Arts and Culture) in the framework of „Kulturtransfair VII“. The project has been facilitated by the MehrWERT sponsoring program of the Erste Bank and has been implemented between January 2017 and June 2017. The project is – still involving the target group – under further development and broadens the portfolio of Obdach Wien in the field of peer support.

Obdach wohnmobil, the mobile support team of Obdach Wien (the biggest support organization for homeless people in Vienna), works with formerly homeless people who are moving in an own flat again. The way back into an own living space is a big step and may be characterized by joy and specific plans. But sometimes it also leads to anxiousness and overextension. Obdach wohnmobil enables people in this situation to develop personal strategies for a mostly independent life in their new flat and to keep it in the long term.

Peer support is a part of the social support given by Obdach wohnmobil. The term describes social work in groups which encourages exchange and support between affected people. Peer means "being equal" and is (in this context) characterized by the gathering of people who share similar experiences. The acknowledgement of being an expert in one's own concerns and the passing on of such expert's knowledge to others, encouragement and support of self organization are important aspects of peer support. Competencies and abilities shall be imparted and passed on on the same level.

The bigger part of the project participants originates from the group "von uns für uns" (From Us for Us) which proliferates from this approach of social work. Their experience and know how have essentially influenced the design process. The group has been part of the project right from the start and carries it further up to today.

The project participants' reality of life constituted the initial situation: the new start in a usually empty Gemeindewohnung (a special form of subsidized apartments administered by the city of Vienna) with modest belongings and limited financial means. The priority in furnishing is principally given to a fitting sleeping facility, the resources for a kitchen are often lacking. The flat is usually not furnished at all, but a stove and a sink will be provided to the tenants of a Gemeindewohnung by request – an offer which formerly homeless people often do not seize due to the challenging situation of moving in. Some people are living without a kitchen for years, use to cook on the floor or not at all. But: Especially the kitchen with its social component contributes to a good arrival in the new flat, to feeling at home and keeping it on the long term. Furthermore, it is far cheaper to cook than to buy readily prepared food or convenience products.

What basically applies: When people bond with objects within their flat and these objects get a special significance they adopt the space. This can be accomplished when furniture is – like the *Wiener Kuchl* – designed and built by themselves. That's why "Do it yourself" has been chosen as a method for the project. Its overall goal was to complement the provided stove and sink with the lacking parts of a simple kitchen. Specific goals were the building of a prototype and the production of a construction manual.

Within three months formerly homeless people, the designer Klemens Schilling and the architect Eldine Heep have developed a kitchen which takes the target groups' realities and problems into account – using the method of "Design Thinking". The project coordinators Beate Lex from MAK and Lena Kauer from Obdach wohnmobil controlled the process, gave input from their specific working fields and led the participants through the project. But other professions took part as well: The carpenter Reinhard Hermann from a Viennese self-help work shop helped with the carpenter workshops. The graphic designer Martina Fischmeister developed the construction manual. Anselm Tröster produced the video manual. Monika Wagner from Hunger auf Kunst und Kultur maintained the interface to the sponsoring. The photographer Nick Mangafas documented the whole process photographically.

The project started with bringing home to the designer and the architect how the participants use their kitchens and which functions should they fulfill. Besides the high prize of a customary kitchen the participants faced further challenges: the transportation, the lack of tools, the fitting size and the possibility to customize the kitchen. Hence, from the view of the peer group the outcome should be an affordable, customizable kitchen which might easily be transported to the flat and built with low technical effort. A kitchen which would be designed not for the people concerned but together with them and which would inspire others in the future. The question was, how the mentioned challenges could be met well so that as many people with low income as possible could benefit from the outcome. To reach this goal, a building supplies store was visited and the selection of materials and their transportation were discussed and planned. During the project, two prototypes were built together and mounted at two participants' places. The generated knowledge and the comprising project description lead to a construction manual and a video which is accesible online for everyone (<https://www.obdach.wien/n/die-wiener-kuchl>).

The cooperation of formerly homeless people with a multiprofessional team and different players was a new and profitable experience for all the parties involved. Thanks to the mutual exchange a product evolved that could only be developed so accurately because the people concerned played an active part and had the possibility to speak up right from the start. Some in the group showed high self-motivation, an increasing impetus and reliability. Appreciation and understanding between people who would have never come together otherwise became noticeable – a new quality in collaboration for the professionals as well as the peers.

After only a short time the project received big attention by the media. Print media, TV and radio reported. Participants were interviewed and could tell of their problems but also their individual solution strategies. The *Wiener Kuchl* served and still serves as an object which makes social realities and necessities visible, as well as it makes a broader public understand social work and peer support. The *Wiener Kuchl* has given a new complexion to social problems and people concerned by them – another reason for the public interest in it. The kitchen has also been exhibited in different settings, for example at the Vienna Biennale 2016. In houses for homeless people run by Obdach Wien as well as in other social institutions, in public spaces and community colleges workshops with other people concerned took place. Every time the process of building something together, learning, but especially the mutual exchange had priority. The appreciation granted to the project participants again and again were very conducive to this. On the other hand, the participants themselves showed solidarity with other people in difficult situations, for example during the workshop with refugees.

Innovative approaches like this one may support the extension of Housing First offers (the direct provision of a flat to homeless people). Since the provision of a flat is not enough: Many people concerned suffer from psychosocial problems, can hardly structure their everyday life and only few of them have chances on the first labor market. All the more important is it to tie them to a social environment and to strengthen their abilities for enabling them to find meaningful activities.

To carry on the positive effects of the project within the framework of peer support at Obdach Wien a buddy system will be implemented after its formal conclusion. The goal is that project participants who know how to build the kitchen support others at it. Again, not only the building but also the exchange are focussed. At the same time the buddies can make work experiences, feel their self-efficacy and train being responsible for something. People who have been in the system of assistance to the homeless partly for years have often lost these abilities. Regarding this from a professional point of view, the effect of the project exceeds the development of the kitchen design by far.

In November 2017 an according pilot project supported by an additional sponsoring by Erste Bank could be started. At the moment ten kitchens are being mounted, the involved buddies get an appropriate allowance. New questions keep turning up: What can be done in the framework of social work, what exceeds feasibility, what might be mastered in collaboration with other companies? The *Wiener Kuchl* is under constant development. Each step is discussed within the peer group, there are still workshops, presentations and media requests. If additional money for sinks, customization or transportation are needed, the awareness reached by the *Wiener Kuchl* helps raising small sums from private or public means. In March 2018 the project will be presented on the Österreichische Armutskonferenz (Austrian Conference about Poverty) and a workshop about building the *Wiener Kuchl* will be held.

With every challenge and every mastered task the participants are growing. The project encourages new ideas.