

Extended Urbanization in Comparison:

Housing, Mobility, and Everyday Life in the Alpenrheintal and the Gauteng City Region

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Project Summary

This research project examined housing production under conditions of extended urbanization through a comparative analysis of the Alpine Rhine Valley (Austria) and the Gauteng City-Region (South Africa). The central objective was to understand how housing densification operates as a strategy of urban development and governance, and how it is intertwined with processes of commodification that shape housing affordability, socio-spatial inequality, and everyday life.

The project was based on long-term qualitative and ethnographic research, document analysis, and comparative urban analysis conducted in both regions. By bringing a Global North and Global South context into direct comparison, the research revealed striking parallels despite very different historical, political, and institutional settings. In both cases, densification has become a central mechanism for extracting value from land and housing, embedded in growth-oriented planning frameworks and public-private governance arrangements. Rather than primarily addressing social or spatial justice objectives, densification often reinforces existing power relations, contributes to socio-spatial fragmentation, and prioritizes the exchange value of housing over its use value.

The main scientific output of the project is the peer-reviewed article *"Densification by commodification: Comparing the production of housing in the Gauteng City-Region and Alpine Rhine Valley"*, published in the international journal *Urban Studies*. The article advances debates in urban studies by conceptualizing densification as an integral component of housing commodification and by identifying shared "modalities" of housing production across contrasting urban regions. Beyond this publication, the project generated further academic outputs and impacts. Research findings were presented and discussed at several international conferences and thematic workshops in 2025, contributing to scholarly debates in geography, urban studies, and housing research.

The project also supported the development of new research collaborations and follow-up work, including a paper currently under review on housing (de-)commodification in the Alpine Rhine Valley and the preparation of new funding proposals on socially sustainable densification. Overall, the project provides a robust comparative foundation for future research and policy-relevant discussions on housing affordability and urban transformation.



Fig.1: Urban expansion through standardized, single-family homes in Northern Johannesburg (own take)



Fig.2: Single-Family-Home-expansion in Vorarlberg, 1931, accompanied by a text praising the high housing culture («Wohnkultur») in Vorarlberg (Wüstenroter Werkschau, 1931)

Project Objectives and Methodological Approach

Johannesburg and the Alpenrheintal at first seem to be two places that are impossible to compare. However, we were inspired by comparative urban research between sites in the Global North and South (Lancione and McFarlane, 2016; Lemanski, 2022) that seeks to "support different ways of working across diverse urban experiences" (McFarlane and Robinson, 2012: 765). In taking each case individually and following "inductive reasoning to find similarities and differences" (Söderstrom, 2021), we developed hypotheses about spatial phenomena that take seriously the value of working "between contexts and cities that have traditionally neither been found in conversation with one another, nor considered valid sources for the construction of new knowledges outside of the traditional canon of theory" (Rubin et al., 2023).

Conceptual Approach:

Layers of housing (de-)commodification

(La Grange & Pretorius 2005; Kadi 2024; Schipper & Schöning, 2024)

- *Non-profit providers:* promotion of cooperatives, municipal/provincial and non-commercial housing actors.
 - *Housing supply support:* subsidies for new construction, social housing, expansion of public stock (purchase, construction, re-municipalization).
 - *Market intervention:* rent control, purpose limitations, urban planning measures (pre-emptive rights, milieu protection, building regulations).
 - *Market access support:* individual subsidies (e.g. housing allowance, tax allowances, beneficial credits).
- *In some welfare regimes, social housing provision is heavily supported by civil society and private actors, not only the state.*

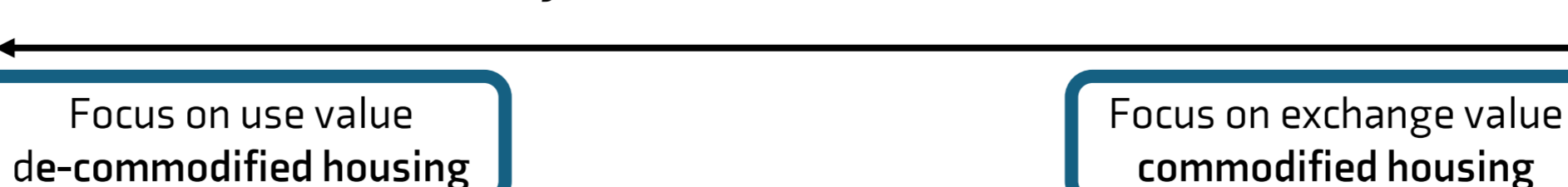


Fig.3: Factors influencing the (de-)commodification of housing

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Five Modalities of Housing Densification in the Alpenrheintal and the Gauteng City Region

1. Trajectories of Value Extraction

- Housing densification has historically been central to economic growth by concentrating labor close to sites of production.
- In both regions, dense housing initially served use value (worker accommodation)
- This produced long-term socio-spatial segregation and extracted value from marginalized social groups.

2. (De-)Densification through Mass Housing Urbanization

- States actively use densification and de-densification as tools to manage populations and economic development.
- Mass housing programs produced dense settlements, often on urban peripheries to serve post-war industrial expansion
- This modality institutionalized large-scale, standardized housing as a vehicle for both social control and market expansion.

3. (Re-)Commodification of the Existing Housing Stock

- Since 1980s older housing stock and former industrial sites are re-commodified through redevelopment, and market repositioning.
- Densification increasingly targets central and well-located areas to capture rising land values.

4. Territorial Fragmentation

- Housing and planning governance are fragmented across multiple territorial and institutional levels in both Johannesburg and the Alpenrheintal.
- Fragmentation enables uneven densification strategies and selective value capture by public and private actors.
- As a result, densification outcomes vary spatially, reinforcing uneven development within extended urban regions.

5. Consolidation of Power by Local Elites

- Long-standing networks between developers, political actors, and planning authorities shape densification outcomes.
- These actor constellations stabilize over time, consolidating control over land, planning decisions, and investment flows.
- Densification thus reproduces existing power hierarchies rather than challenging them.

Research Output and future work

- Scientific paper "Densification by commodification: Comparing the production of housing in the Gauteng City-Region and Alpine Rhine Valley" that was published in the renowned journal "Urban Studies" as part of a special issue.
- Scientific paper "Understanding housing (de-)commodification in the Alpenrheintal - a long-term, comparative approach." written by Johannes Herburger is currently under review in *Geographica Helvetica*
- Furthermore, this project allowed Johannes Herburger to strengthen his scientific networks and collaborations by attending two workshops and three conferences, where he presented findings of this project:
 - Workshop HousAlps (8-9 October 2025) hosted by Prof. Dr. Gabriela Debrunner at the University of Lausanne: from this workshop, a collaboration for an SNF-FWF-WEAVE-proposal emerged
 - Workshop ASG Thematic Group "Housing in and beyond Switzerland" (5. December 2025): Johannes is part of this group of young housing researchers and in this workshop future activities have been planned.
 - Royal Geographical Society annual conference, 26-29 August, Birmingham
 - stadt.land.wohnen - Konferenz zur Regionalen Wohnungsmärkten in Österreich, 5-6 November 2025, Salzburg
 - Swiss Geoscience Meeting - Symposium "Housing Dynamics across Diverse Territorial Contexts in Switzerland and Beyond", 6. December 2025: Johannes has been presented and co-organizer of the symposium.